

M. GORKY

SELECTED SHORT STORIES



**Progress Publishers
Moscow**

Translated from the Russian
Designed by V Ilyushchenko

First printing 1955
Second revised
and enlarged edition 1968

М. ГОРЬКИЙ. ИЗБРАННЫЕ РАССКАЗЫ
На английском языке

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CONTENTS

MY TRAVELLING COMPANION. Translated by Avril Pyman	19
CHELKASH Translated by Margaret Wetlin	61
OLD IZERGIL Translated by Margaret Wetlin	104
GRANDFATHER ARKHIP AND LYONKA Translated by Bernard Isaacs	134
ONE AUTUMN Translated by Avril Pyman	166
SONG OF THE FALCON. Translated by Margaret Wetlin	178
KONOVALOV. Translated by Margaret Wetlin	185
FOR WANT OF SOMETHING BETTER TO DO Translated by Margaret Wetlin	249
TWENTY-SIX MEN AND A GIRL Translated by Bernard Isaacs	272
SONG OF THE STORMY PETREL Translated by Margaret Wetlin	290
TALES OF ITALY Translated by Rose Prokosieva	292
CHILDREN OF PARMA	292
THE TUNNEL	296
THE MOTHER OF A TRAITOR	302
PEPE	310
THE ICE IS MOVING. Translated by Avril Pyman	317
A MAN IS BORN. Translated by Bernard Isaacs	350
THE CREEPY-CRAWLIES Translated by Bernard Isaacs	365
FIRST LOVE Translated by Margaret Wetlin	386

P R E F A C E

In 1892, when the first work bearing the pen-name Maxim Gorky appeared, its author, the Nizhni-Novgorod workman Alexei Peshkov, was twenty-four. By that time he had lived through so much, had suffered so much in the harsh school of life and gained from it such rich experience that few writers among his predecessors and contemporaries could compare with him in this respect. Nor are there many writers who have worked their way up to the heights of world culture as swiftly as he has done.

Gorky's life story is too well known to need retelling. I would merely remind the reader that several years before he began his literary career, which made his name famous in every corner of the globe, the nineteen-year-old youth, who worked in a bakery in Kazan at the time, attempted to commit suicide. What impelled him to do this? Was it because he was driven to despair by the hopeless drudgery of life in a dark stuffy basement, which resembled a prison cell and which was later described in Gorky's stories *Konovalov*, *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl* and others? No, the young man had worked before this as a dock labourer, a farm hand and a barge hauler. The treadmill life, the back-breaking toil and poverty were all too familiar to him since childhood. It was not this that made him attempt suicide. He had read many books which spoke about the possibility of "reorganising the social order" and the possibility for people to win freedom. He believed in this and thought he had been successful in inspiring this belief in others, in the people who worked with him in the prison-like basement. But when the student disturbances broke out in Kazan (a leading part in them was played by young Lenin, the future great friend of Gorky), these same workmates of his urged him to join them in attacking the students. Deeply shaken, experiencing an intense revulsion, he was at a loss for words to show them how horrible

this was. It was then, in a fit of despair, that the shot rang out on the high bluff overlooking the river Kazanka

Had that bullet, aimed at his heart, found its target, we would have known nothing about Alexei Peshkov and there would have been no writer by the name of Maxim Gorky. His life would have been cut short as had many a young life in those grim times of rampant reaction which came in the wake of the fruitless "going-among-the-people" movement and the abortive revolutionary uprisings. The bullet missed the heart, however, and pierced a lung, and the young man came to in a hospital. He came to himself to see around him the very workmates who had caused him all that mental agony. Now in their faces he read concern for himself, sympathy and reproach inspired by their love for him. And it dawned on him that it was not these men who were bad, it was the conditions that condemned them to a life of darkness and ignorance. It was shameful, therefore, to give way to despair. Life could and should be altered. But to do that one had to know life better, to know one's people and one's country, and find such words, such ideas and ideals which would rouse people to action.

Ever since then none of life's trials could break Gorky's will. And life had many trials, sufferings and dangers in store for him—more than enough for a hundred men. In 1891-92 Russia was hit by an appalling national calamity—famine, which drove millions of peasants from their homes in the Volga and central provinces and sent them trudging the roads leading south in whole families, whole villages. Lev Tolstoi, Chekhov, Korolenko and other Russian writers devoted considerable energy towards organising relief for the famine-stricken population. Gorky was not yet a writer, he was one of the famine's victims—together with them he passed through the Ukraine, Crimea and Caucasus. Often he was beaten within an inch of his life and run in by the police as a "suspicious character". Altogether, he lived through so much that it is difficult to understand how he survived. But instead of plunging him into despair, as it did before, all this tended to rouse in him a growing feeling of protest and a surge of energy. This was when he started to write.

For several years the writings of young Gorky appeared mainly in provincial Volga publications, and although his

fresh and vivid talent immediately attracted the attention of distinguished writers, his name had not yet become widely popular. All this changed when, in 1898, there appeared his first small volumes of collected *Sketches and Stories*, which had a tremendous success and placed him alongside the literary celebrities of his day. Gorky's novel *Foma Gordeyev*, published a year later, excited almost as much interest as Tolstoi's *Resurrection*. And when this was followed by Gorky's short novel *The Three* and by his debut in the field of dramaturgy (especially his great philosophical drama *The Lower Depths* which was a sensational success), his fame spread beyond the bounds of his own country and became world-wide.

Gorky's first successes, however, gave rise to the first legends about him, and these legends grew apace with the growth of his fame. Many critics declared that the phenomenal popularity of the young author was due not so much to the force of his talent as to the sensational interest which his unusual background had aroused. This was not true. His success had begun before the facts of his life became known, and it was this success that led to the publication of biographical information about him at the end of the 90s. Many critics ascribed his popularity to the fact that he wrote about declassed characters and expressed their feelings and moods, their anarchistic striving after "absolute freedom" of the individual, their contempt of the "mob", of morality, of all social obligations, which was in keeping with the ideas of Nietzsche. This again was untrue. Gorky did describe tramps, described them with extraordinary vigour as no one else had succeeded in doing before him, but he never shared their anarchistic aspirations and was from the very outset a passionate opponent of Nietzscheism. True, like Nietzsche, he hated bourgeois philistinism, but whereas Nietzsche's concept of philistinism included the people (this led him to extremely reactionary conclusions), Gorky regarded philistines as the chief enemies of the people, of the masses from whose midst he himself had risen and whose mouthpiece he became from his very first steps in literature.

Let us take one of Gorky's earliest stories *My Travelling Companion*. On the surface it is merely an assay at reminiscence, an autobiographical episode. As a matter of

fact it describes the narrator's actual encounter with an impoverished Georgian princeling, a down-and-out, who had lost none of his arrogance, his sense of exclusiveness, of his right to oppress others. "The strong man is a law unto himself" The narrator regards his "travelling companion" both as life's victim, deserving of sympathy, and as a parasite who aroused a growing inner protest Why then does the narrator still keep company with this character, doing the work of two for both of them? Why, when he sees the futility of his appeals urging his "companion" to arrange their life on the basis of "mutual aid", does he allow him to enslave and exploit him more and more? When we put this question to ourselves, we begin to understand that the story *My Travelling Companion* is much deeper than it seems at first glance, that it really describes what is a most interesting psychological, even socio-philosophical "experiment". "He enslaved me," writes Gorky, "and I submitted to him and studied him, watching every flicker of expression, trying to figure out when and at what joint he would pull himself up in this process of establishing his dominion over another man" In other words, the narrator wanted to find out for himself to what lengths evil and violence could go if unresisted (the story here makes a polemic point against the Tolstoian teaching of non-resistance to evil) The inference was that such a "travelling companion" (and their name is legion) would never himself stop "in the process of establishing his dominion over another man", and that no words, however good, could ever change him. What was needed was a drastic breaking up of the entire social system which bred men such as these, including those luckier ones who had not sunk to the bottom but remained at life's top.

Among the down-and-outs described by Gorky there were all kinds of people, who evoked different attitudes towards them on his part At one pole were the egoistic and domineering "travelling companions", at the other Konovalov and his like, wavering between enthusiasm for work and vagabondage. But even men like Konovalov were described by the writer not as models to be copied, but as "material evidence" of the crimes of the old world, which warped the characters, gifts and noblest aspirations of men. Gorky sympathised with the tragic experience of people

who had come to realise the slave nature of work, but he was not in sympathy with the conclusions they drew from this, namely: their refusal to work, their abdication from responsibilities to society, and their anarchistic revolt against it. Akin to these tramp characters are Gorky's gallery of "repentant tradesmen", members of the bourgeoisie, who break out of their class, beginning with Foma Gordeyev and ending with Yegor Bulychov. Their appeal for Gorky lay in all those aspects of their characters which placed them in opposition to the "normal" life of the "normal" bourgeois—men like Mayakin, Dostigayev and others. He realised, however, that their lone revolt was futile, doomed in advance, and that in pushing off from one shore they were incapable of making the other, and could only end in tragic isolation.

The story *Old Izergil* was of programmatic significance for Gorky. The three parts of this work deal with three roads which are open to every person. The first part deals with the legend about Larra (as the Gypsy Izergil explains, Larra means "outcast, the ejected"). The main idea of this legend is that there is no greater punishment for a man than to be an outcast, isolated from his people. Nietzsche's favourite hero, the superman Zarathustra, preached that man was happy only when he was solitary. The story of Larra teaches that loneliness is the greatest misfortune that can befall a man, that even death is a lesser punishment. The last part of the story—the legend about Danko's burning heart—tells what sublime happiness it is for a man to sacrifice himself for the sake of his people's freedom. The message conveyed by the central part of the story devoted to Izergil herself is that one cannot perform brave deeds while at the same time living only for oneself, for love and personal happiness, that one cannot be simultaneously Danko and Larra, because in that event a "timid, slavish note" would creep into the soul of a strong and brave person, such as Izergil was in her youth, and that person would evoke not admiration, like Danko, nor hatred, like Larra, but only pity.

In 1900, at the turn of the century, Gorky created a work in which the plot of *Old Izergil* was transplanted from the sphere of legend to the sphere of real life. It was the novel *The Three*. Here again the reader is led,

as it were, to the forking of three roads and left to choose one of them for himself. The road of the novel's chief character, Ilya Lunev, who challenges "normal" bourgeois philistine life to single combat (for Gorky there is nothing more abnormal, more unnatural than this life), leads him to a dead end, to suicide. Yakov Filimonov, who gives up the struggle entirely and abandons all resistance to the powers of evil, meets a still more awful fate. And only the third character, Pavel Grachov, who comes in contact with revolutionary intellectuals, finds an avenue of escape into real life. When Gorky wrote this novel he was himself on the threshold of this new road that spelt salvation. Combining as they did fearless realistic truth with a note of buoyancy and optimism remarkable in an artist whom life had treated so roughly, with heroic glorification of "the madness of daring", his early writings already contained the essential elements of future great artistic discoveries. But Gorky had not yet become socialist-minded, he was not yet conscious of the proletariat's historical mission. The working class was still depicted by him as a class of exploited, oppressed and suffering people, and not as a mighty power capable of winning freedom from slavery for itself and all the toiling masses. A jolt was needed to bring this home to him. This jolt was supplied by the powerful upsurge of the revolutionary movement within the country, to which the writer responded with his "Song of the Stormy Petrel". No less important was the fact that his path converged with that of Lenin, first with his writings and his ideas, and then with Lenin himself, who became his friend and adviser.

Gorky embraced Leninism in his own manner—as an artist deeply concerned in the problem of humanism. He had posed this problem as early as 1901 in his play *The Philistines*, where he first sketched the figure of a worker who had risen to the level of socialist consciousness—the proletarian revolutionary Nil. The philistines attempt to pass moral judgement on Nil and his comrades, whom they accuse of callousness, harshness, even cruelty and lack of humanism. In the course of this "trial" the "accused" change places with their accusers, who find themselves in the dock. It becomes clear that there is far more genuine love of mankind in Nil's openness, honesty and irreconcili-

lability than in all the mouthings of the old and young Bessemenovs, who talk about humility, compassion, and so on. The problem of true and false humanism was treated still more broadly and profoundly by Gorky in *The Lower Depths*. This play debunks the "consolatory" preaching of old Luka, whose philosophy, in a nutshell, is expressed in the aphorism, "Whatever you believe in, that's what there is." Luka invents for every person a comforting lie, an illusion, capable of soothing him for a time. He does this because he does not believe that people are capable of changing the pattern of life. He does not believe it can be changed. What would we think of a doctor who believed that all illnesses were incurable and that his sole task was to conceal this from his patients? Luka is just such a doctor. And though his compassion for people is sincere, this compassion, uncombined with respect towards them and with faith in their powers, only causes them harm. As an alternative to this passive humanism and resignation, Gorky gives us the humanism of revolutionary struggle, which faces up to the truth of life in order to change that life and man himself, in order to emancipate him from within and without. Millions of people in all tongues repeat the inspiring words from this play: "Man—that is the truth", "How proud the word rings—MAN!", "All things are part of man, all things are for man"

The problem of revolutionary humanism is dealt with also in Gorky's novel *Mother*, written in 1906. This is a remarkable book. There is hardly a work of fiction in world literature which has had such a vast readership and such powerful impact. It can also be said that there were few works of literature whose artistic merit was so often challenged, even by those who highly appreciated its educative role and social message. What was the reason? Apart from those cases where the reason was to be sought in the critics' hostile attitude to the writer's credo, the explanation is to be found in the novel's artistic merits rather than its artistic shortcomings, in its daring novelty. It has often been said that the novel *Mother* depicts life among the working class, its fight against the autocracy and the bourgeoisie, the growth of its revolutionary consciousness, and the rise of leaders from its midst. All this, of course, is true, but the description is too general

and does little to explain why an artistic form was required for such content, and what exactly that form should be. Moreover, a number of puzzling questions arise. How is it, that in a book dealing with the life of the working class, the work of these people, which Gorky always portrayed with real knowledge and affection, is not depicted at all (we do not even know what factory was the scene of the novel's events)? Why, in a work describing the class struggle of the proletariat, not a single capitalist is portrayed (yet Gorky was intimately acquainted with this milieu, as his novel *Foma Gordeyev* testifies), while the various servants of the bourgeoisie and autocracy—the police, gendarmes, judges, etc.—unlike the positive characters, are not shown from within (as they were in the brief scenes of his play *Enemies*, which he wrote at the same time)? If the author of *Mother* wanted to show the growth of revolutionary consciousness, why, instead of her son, that “iron man” Pavel, did he make Pelageya Nilovna the central figure of the story—a woman who has to fight hard to throw off her fear of life and religious yoke.

All these questions become superfluous when the real theme of *Mother* emerges. This is not simply a story about the revolutionary struggle, but the story of how a woman of the people undergoes an inner transformation, a spiritual rebirth, in the process of that struggle, in its cleansing fire. We are shown the renascence of the human spirit, freed from the fear of the soulless machine of suppression, which acts only by force of inertia, fear of the humanoid instruments of this suppression, who have no ideals to their name. Humans versus unhumans, man versus automaton—this principle of portrayal which afterwards received general recognition in prose, poetry and dramaturgy, was first applied by Gorky in describing the struggle of the working class against the capitalist system. The theme of man's rebirth acquired a profound philosophical and sharply controversial meaning. Whereas Dostoyevsky feared that the revolutionary struggle would sharpen in people their feeling of enmity towards one another and rouse in them bestial instincts, Gorky on the contrary showed that only the revolutionary struggle was capable of cleansing the soul of man of all that was animal-like and egoistic. Whereas

Tolstoi envisaged man's "resurrection" only through self-perfection, renunciation of politics and non-resistance to evil, it is only by taking the path of struggle that the heroine of *Mother* wins the right to exclaim. "They can't kill my spirit—my living spirit!"

The same theme—that of spiritual rebirth, runs through Gorky's famous autobiographical trilogy—the novels *Childhood*, *My Apprenticeship* and *My Universities*. The story of Alexei Peshkov's spiritual development is a story of the conflict in which two cross-firing influences fought for his soul. On one hand were representatives of the people, each talented in his own way, engaged in the painful quest of truth and justice. On the other were petty-bourgeois philistines, proprietors, money-grubbers, in whom all talent and strivings were crushed by a single feeling—greed. Above the two portrait galleries given in the trilogy tower two remarkably vivid characters, which belong to the most profound artistic creations of the twentieth century—that of Gorky's grandmother Akulina Ivanovna, who became the boy's dearest friend and his grandfather Vasily Ivanovich, in whom he "immediately sensed . . . an enemy". It is difficult to imagine two more dissimilar and contrasting characters. The grandfather was a greedy grasping man, the grandmother—the very soul of "selfless love for people". The grandfather was convinced that "man was man's direst enemy" and nobody was to be trusted; the grandmother—that there were more good people than bad and that people had to be trusted. They had different "teaching" methods: the grandfather toughened the boy for the harsh life to come by threats and floggings; the grandmother tried to awaken good feelings in him by kindness. They had different artistic tastes too: the grandfather preferred the true story of harsh sober reality, the grandmother fairy tales, songs and legends expressing the dreams of the people, the grandeur of its soul. They had different religions: the grandfather's god was malevolent and vindictive, the grandmother's benevolent, loving, ready to help everyone.

Yet we would be making a great mistake if we saw only the good in the grandmother and the bad in the grandfather. They are extremely complex characters, and it is in this complexity that the philosophical meaning of Gorky's

creations is revealed. This wonderful grandmother, who had brought out the artist in Gorky, was also an hindrance to him—by her readiness to bear anything, to put up with everything and everybody, her way of looking at the world through the web of fairy tales and not noticing all that was bad and terrifying in it. Horrid as were his grandfather's stories of brutal souls and bestial ways, young Gorky benefited by them in that they did not let him get blinded by the fairy tales. Grandmother was contented with life and wanted the boy to enjoy it, grandfather was embittered, he had a grudge against life, but was convinced that it could not be altered. One must howl with the wolves. Neither of these attitudes was acceptable to Gorky. Looking life boldly in the face, seeing in it all the evil and the cruel that aroused such hatred in his heart, he was convinced that people were capable of defeating evil and would eventually do so if they conquered their habit of long-suffering patience and learned instead to fight. Only along this path could there be a rebirth of the soul of man and the spirit of the people.

In the writings of Gorky there were two key themes, which were mutually complementary and disclosed to us the sanctum sanctorum of his world outlook, his aesthetic attitude to reality. This is the theme of spiritual rebirth, which takes place in a man who throws in his lot with that of his people, with the revolutionary development of reality, and the theme of the "disintegrated personality", which is the penalty paid by those who try to cut adrift from the people and escape the stormy torrent of history. While the former theme received its highest expression in the novel *Mother*, the latter, running through a number of Gorky's works, was summed up and most broadly elaborated in his "farewell" work, the four-volume epic novel *The Life of Klim Samgin*. The "Samgin complex" is one of the chief barriers in the path of man's spiritual emancipation and rebirth. It is the philistine striving after peace and quiet at all cost, even if it meant arresting life or turning it back. It is the bourgeois individualistic illusion that it is possible to secure "absolute freedom" of the individuality, its complete independence from classes and parties, its release from all responsibility before history. Life's whole course shatters this illusion of Samgin's and gradu-

ally turns him into an abject plaything of reactionary forces

The Life of Klim Samgin was one of the most significant works of the century, ranking with the greatest creations of world literature. In fact, the last years of Gorky's life witnessed a remarkable resurgence of his genius. In addition to *The Life of Klim Samgin* and other epic works, he created new masterpieces of dramaturgy, such as *Yegor Bulychov and Others*, *Dostigayev and Others*, and the second variant of *Vassa Zheleznova*. Yegor Bulychov and Vassa Zheleznova—both complex and tragic figures, albeit in different ways—represent the collapse of the very foundations of the bourgeois way of life. More than any other heroes of twentieth-century drama, they are commensurable with the characters of Shakespearean tragedies.

In 1921, on Lenin's insistence, Gorky went abroad for a cure. His lungs, weakened by the old bullet wound, became less and less resistant to the chronic tuberculosis from which he suffered. His very life was in danger. The illness showed no signs of abating with the years, but Gorky felt more and more drawn to his country, where socialist construction was proceeding on a vast scale. Beginning with 1928 he returned every year to the USSR during the summer, but with the onset of the damp and cold months he went back to Italy, to a climate to which his constitution had become accustomed. Nevertheless, in 1933 Gorky decided to stay at home for good, despite the fact that his illness made itself felt more and more often. He knew that he was shortening his life, but he could not act otherwise: the fascists had come to power in Germany and the clouds of war were gathering again, a war that would be spearheaded against the world's first socialist state. Gorky became a passionate anti-fascist, one of the leaders of the world's peace movement. His publicist writing and multifarious public activities assumed a particularly wide scope. He never tired of drawing the attention of Soviet writers to defence tasks, preparing them for the exploit they were collectively to perform during the years of the Great Patriotic War. The last words he uttered on his deathbed before losing consciousness were: "There'll be wars.... We must be prepared...." He died like Danko.

Today, on Gorky's centenary, and thirty years after

his death, he is still the central figure of the world's literary process. The new ground that he opened up in literature is still fertile soil. Yet attempts to write off Gorky were made long ago, almost from the beginning of his career. It will be remembered that Gorky had only to rise to a socialist awareness in his character study of Nil, in his drama *The Lower Depths* and other works—now regarded as classics even by his ideological opponents—for his ill-wishers to spread the malicious rumour. “Gorky is finishing.” He had only to display a flesh surge of creative power during the years of the first Russian revolution for an article to appear with the still more funereal heading “The End of Gorky”. A few years later, when new admirable works of his appeared, one of his critics declared that Gorky was not only finished, but that he had never begun. What has happened to the authors of these statements? They appeared and disappeared, and no one is interested any longer in their beginnings or their ends.

But the Nizhny Novgorod workman Alexei Peshkov, the great writer Maxim Gorky, continues to tread the roads of Russia and the rest of the world, warming the hearts of millions.

And this road has no end.

Professor *Boris Byalik*, Dr. Phil

SELECTED SHORT STORIES

MY TRAVELLING COMPANION*

I

I met him in the harbour of Odessa. For three successive days my attention had been drawn by that low-slung, sturdy figure and by that eastern face framed in a handsome beard. Ever so often he would crop up before me: I would see him standing for hours at a time on the granite pier, chewing on the head of his cane and gazing dully over the turgid waters of the harbour with his black, almond-shaped eyes; a dozen times a day he would stroll past me with the air of a man who has not a care in the world. Who was he?... I began to watch him. He, for his part, as though on purpose to whet my interest, began to crop up more and more often and, finally, I became accustomed to the sight of his fashionable, light check suit and black hat, his lazy step and dull, bored gaze and began to recognise him from far away. He was totally out of place here in the harbour amid the whistling of steamers and engines, the clanking of chains, the shouts of the dockers, the frantic, all-enveloping hustle of the port. All the people here were preoccupied, tired, all were bustling, begrimed, sweating, shouting

* This story is autobiographical. Gorky travelled from Odessa to Tiflis in August-November 1891. His travelling companion was a man by the name of Tsulukidze (figuring as S—dze) who gave the editors of the Georgian newspaper *Tsnobis Purtseli* his own version of the journey.—*Ed.*

and swearing. And through all this busy clamour strolled that strange figure of a man with his deadly-bored face—indifferent to everything, remote and isolated.

Finally, on the fourth day, I came across him during the lunch break and decided that, come what may, I must find out who he was. Settling down not far away from him with a loaf of bread and a water-melon, I began to eat and to watch him, wondering what would be the politest way of getting into conversation.

He was standing leaning against a pile of tea packets and gazing idly round, fingering his cane as though it were a flute.

For me, dressed like a tramp and with a docker's strap on my back, all stained with coal dust, it was difficult to make the first approach to such a dandy. However, to my surprise, I saw that his eyes were fixed upon me and that they were now animated by an unpleasant, greedy, animal flame. I decided that the object of my contemplation was hungry and, taking a quick look round, I asked him quietly:

“Want something to eat?”

He started, avidly bared something like a hundred close-set, healthy teeth and, like me, glanced suspiciously about him.

No one was paying us any attention. I handed him half the water-melon and a piece of wheaten bread. He seized the lot and disappeared, squatting down behind a pile of crates. Sometimes his head would emerge briefly, the hat pushed back and showing his tanned, perspiring forehead. His face shone with a wide smile and, for some reason best known to himself, he kept winking at me, without for one second ceasing to chew. I made a sign that he should wait for me and went to buy some meat, bought it, brought it back,

gave it to him and stood by the crates in such a way as to hide him from the eyes of any passers-by. Until then he had kept peering round like a beast of prey at his kill, as though he were afraid someone might snatch it away from him; now he began to eat more calmly, yet still so hurriedly and avidly that it became painful for me to watch this desperately hungry man and I turned my back on him.

"I tank you! I tank you verry much!" He shook me by the shoulder, then seized my hand, squeezed it and began to shake it painfully.

In five minutes' time he was launched on his story.

A Georgian, Prince Shakro Ptadze, the only son of his father, a rich landlord from Kutaisi, he had been serving as a clerk on a station of the Transcaucasian railway and living with a friend. This friend had suddenly disappeared taking with him all Prince Shakro's money and valuables and so the prince had set out in pursuit. By chance, he heard that his friend had taken a ticket for Batumi; Prince Shakro followed him at once. In Batumi, however, it came to light that the friend had gone on to Odessa. Then Prince Shakro had approached a certain Vano Svanidze, a barber—also a friend, the same age as himself, but not answering to a similar physical description—borrowed his passport, and set off for Odessa. Here he informed the police of the theft, they promised to find the thief for him, he waited for two weeks, ate through all his money, and this was now the second day that he had not had a bite to eat.

I listened to his story, interspersed with curses, watched him, believed him, and felt sorry for the boy—he was rising twenty and so naive that one might have given him still less. Frequently and

with profound indignation he referred to the firm friendship which had bound him to the thief who had robbed him of things for which Shakro's stern father would doubtless "cut my throat" with a "dagga" if his son failed to retrieve them. I thought that, unless someone helped this lad, the avid city would suck him under. I knew what frequently trivial causes sometimes swelled the ranks of the down-and-out, and here Prince Shakro had every opportunity of entering that worthy but scantily respected social group. I wanted to help him. I suggested to Shakro that we should go to the Chief of Police and ask for a ticket, but he looked embarrassed and told me that he would not go. Why? It appeared that he had not paid his landlord for the lodgings he had taken and when asked for the money had struck someone; since then he had been lying low and quite rightly presumed that the police would not thank him for his failure to pay the money or for the blow. Come to that, he could not remember for certain whether it was one blow, two, three or four that he had delivered.

This complicated the situation. I decided that I would keep on at my present job until I had earned enough money to send him back to Batumi, but—alas!—this promised to be too lengthy a process because it transpired that Shakro, having tasted hunger, now ate for three or more.

At that time, as a result of an influx of people from famine stricken regions, the daily wage at the harbour was low and between us, out of the eighty kopeks I earned, we spent sixty on food. In addition to this, before I met the prince I had decided to go on to the Crimea and had no desire to stay for long in Odessa. So I suggested to Prince Shakro that he and I should go together

on foot under the following conditions: if I could not find him a travelling companion on to Tiflis I would accompany him myself but, if I did find someone, we would go our separate ways.

The prince looked at his smart shoes, his hat, his trousers, stroked his jacket, thought for a while, sighed repeatedly and, finally, gave his consent. So it came about that he and I set off together to walk from Odessa to Tiflis.

II

By the time we got to Kherson I knew my travelling companion to be a naive, wild youth, extremely unschooled, merry when he was full, miserable when he was hungry; knew him as a powerful, good-natured animal.

On the road he told me about the Caucasus, about the way of life of the Georgian landowners, of their amusements and their attitude to the peasants. His tales were interesting, with a weird beauty all their own, but they left me with a most unflattering picture of the teller. He told me, for example, the following story:

A rich prince's neighbours had gathered at his home for a feast; they drank wine, ate *churek* and *shashlyk*, ate *lavash* bread and rice pilaff, and then the prince invited his guests to the stables. The horses were saddled. The prince took the best and set him galloping over the grass. It was a mettlesome stallion! The guests praised his noble bearing and speed, once more the prince put him into a gallop but, suddenly, a peasant on a white horse came thundering over the turf and passed the prince's horse—passed him and ... laughed proudly. The prince was put to shame before all his guests!... His brows twitched

sternly together, he summoned the peasant to him with a gesture and, when the man rode up to him, cut off his head with one blow of his sabre and killed his horse with a pistol shot through the ear, then went to the magistrate and informed them of what he had done. He was sentenced to penal servitude.

Shakro told me all this in a tone of sympathy for the prince. I tried to prove to him that in this case his sympathy was quite wasted, but he rather saw fit to enlighten me.

"Princes are few, peasants are many. No prince should be condemned for just one peasant. Vat is the peasant? Zat." Shakro showed me a clod of earth. "But za prince—za prince is like a star!"

We argued, he lost his temper. When he lost his temper he used to bare his teeth like a wolf and his whole face would become sharp.

"Shut up, Maxim! Never 'ave you lived in za Caucasus!" he would shout at me.

My reasoned arguments were powerless against his spontaneity and what seemed clear as daylight to me simply made him laugh. Whenever I had him cornered by proofs of the superiority of my opinions he would not stop to reconsider but would say:

"You just go on to Caucasus and try zere to live. You see—vat I say is right. Everyone acts zat way, so it must be right. Vy should I be believing you if you alone say zat tings are not so and thousands of people—zat zey are so?"

Then I would give up the argument, realising that only facts, not words could convince a man who believes that life, whatever it be like, is always right and just. I would keep quiet and he, quite carried away, smacking his lips, would talk on about life in the Caucasus, full of wild beauty, full of fire and originality. These stories, while

they interested and entertained me, would at the same time shock and infuriate me by their cruelty, by their reverence for riches and brute strength. Once, I happened to ask him if he knew the teaching of Christ.

"Of course!" he answered shrugging his shoulders.

On further examination, however, it transpired that what he knew was as follows: there had been a person called Christ who rose against the laws of the Jews, and for that the Jews had crucified him on a cross. But he was God and so he did not die on the cross but ascended into heaven and then gave people a new law of life.

"What kind of a law?" I asked.

He looked at me with mocking astonishment and asked:

"You are Christian? Vell zen, I too am Christian. Almost everybody on Earth is Christian. Vell, zen, vy do you ask? You see how everybody lives?—Zat is zee law of Christ."

My blood was up and I began to tell him of the life of Christ. To begin with he listened with attention but this gradually slackened off and finally ended on a yawn.

Seeing that his heart had no ears for me, I again addressed myself to his mind and began to talk to him of the advantages of mutual assistance, of the advantages of knowledge, of the advantages of keeping on the right side of the law, of advantages and nothing but advantages.... But my arguments shattered in fine dust against the stone wall of his understanding of life.

"Might zat is right! Za strong man is za law unto himself! 'Ee does not 'ave to study, 'ce finds 'is road blindfold!" Prince Shakro would argue lazily.

He always remained true to himself. That made me respect him, but he was barbarous, cruel and, every now and again, I felt a sudden surge of hatred for Shakro. However, I did not give up hope of finding some point of contact with him, some common ground on which we could meet and begin to understand one another.

We had traversed the Perekop Isthmus and were approaching Yaila. I was dreaming of the southern shore of the Crimea; the prince, chanting strange songs through his teeth, was castdown. We had got through all our money and so far there had been no opportunities to earn. We were aiming for Theodosia where, at that time, work was beginning on the construction of a harbour.

The prince informed me that he, too, intended to work and that, when we had earned enough money, we would go on by sea to Batumi. In Batumi he had many friends and he would immediately find me a job as a caretaker or watchman. He clapped me on the shoulder and declared patronisingly with an anticipatory clicking of the tongue:

“Such a life I vill organise to you! Tcc, tcc! You vill drink vine—all you vant! Eat mutton—all you vant! Marry viz a Georgian woman, a fat Georgian woman, tcc, tcc. tcc!... She vill bake you *lavash*, bear you children, many children, tcc. tcc!”

That “tcc, tcc!” at first surprised, then began to irritate me, and finally reduced me to a state of miserable fury. In Russia this particular noise is used to call in the pigs; in the Caucasus, it serves as an expression of enthusiasm, regret, pleasure or sorrow.

Shakro’s fashionable suit was already very well worn and his shoes were gaping in many places. His cane and his hat we had sold back in Kher-

son. In place of the hat he had bought himself the old cap of a railway employee.

The first time he had put it on his head—well to one side—he had asked me:

“Ow I look? 'Andsome?”

III

So here we were in the Crimea, Simferopol behind us and headed for Yalta.

I walked in dumb wonder at the natural beauty of this sea-girt corner of earth. The prince sighed grievously and, rolling his melancholy gaze over the surrounding countryside, tried to fill his empty stomach with doubtful berries. His acquaintanceship with their nutritive properties did not always work out happily for him, and often he would demand of me with angry humour:

“And if I turn inside out, 'ow'll I go on after zat? Eh? You tell me—'ow?”

No opportunity for earning anything whatever came our way and we, not having a cent to spend on bread, nourished ourselves on fruits and hopes for the future. Shakro was already beginning to reproach me with laziness and “seeting gaping”, as he put it. He was growing generally wearisome but, most of all, he tormented me with tales of his own fabulous appetite. It appeared that, having broken his fast at midday with “a leetle lamb” and three bottles of wine, at two o'clock he could without any particular effort consume a dinner of three plates of some such outlandish concoction as *chokhokhbili* or *chikhirtma*, a bowl of pilaff, a *shampur** of shashlyk, “unleemited kvantities of

* *Shampur*—an iron rod on which the shashlyk is spitted and grilled—M. Gorky

tolma" and many and various other Caucasian dishes with all of which he was used to take wine—"as much as I liked". Day in, day out he would tell me of his gastronomical interests and discoveries—smacking his lips, his eyes burning, baring his teeth, grinding them, noisily sucking down and swallowing the hungry saliva which sprayed abundantly from his eloquent lips.

Once, near Yalta, I got a job clearing an orchard of pruned branches and, having taken a day's pay in advance, spent the whole half-ruble on bread and meat. When I came back with my purchases the gardener called me and I went off, leaving what I had bought with Shakro who had declined to work on the pretext of a headache. On my return an hour later I saw that Shakro had not been exaggerating in his tales about his appetite: not a crumb remained of all that I had bought. It was an uncomradely act, but I said nothing—which, as it transpired later, was my undoing.

Shakro, noting my silence, took advantage of it in his own way. This was the beginning of an absurd situation. I would work and he, having refused, on one pretext or another, whatever job was offered, would eat, sleep and goad me on to further efforts. I was half-amused, half-sorry for him—the great healthy tough—when he would rake me hungrily with his eyes, having awaited my return, weary after finishing whatever job I had undertaken, in some shady corner. What was still more sad and vexing was that he laughed at me for working. He could afford to laugh because he had learned to beg in the name of Christ. When he had first begun to collect alms he had been ashamed to do so in front of me but later, when we approached a Tatar village, he would

begin his preparations for the collection before my very eyes. For this he hobbled along on a stick dragging one leg as though it were paining him, knowing that the canny Tatars would not open their purses to a healthy lad. I argued with him, trying to bring home to him the shame of such an occupation. . . .

"I not know 'ow to work!" he refuted me briefly.

He did not collect much. At the same time, my own health began to fail somewhat. Our road became harder from day to day, and my relationship with Shakro more and more strained. He now insisted that I should feed him as though by right.

"You are my guide! Guide me! 'Ow is it possible I go so far on foot? I am not used. It may be I die of it. Vy you torment me, keel me? If I die, vat 'appens to all ze uzzers? My muvver, she cries, my farver, 'ee cries, my friends, zey all cry! 'Ow many tears?"

I listened to speeches like these but they did not anger me. At that time I had begun to nurse a strange thought which gave me patience to bear with it all. Sometimes he would sleep and I, looking searchingly into his calm, expressionless face, would repeat to myself, as though the words held some as yet imperfectly understood revelation for me: "My travelling companion. . . . mine. . . . my travelling companion. . . ."

And, somewhere in the dim recesses of mind, arose the thought that Shakro was indeed only insisting on his right when he made such confident and bold demands on my help and care. In these demands there was force of character, there was power. He enslaved me and I submitted to him and studied him, watching every flicker of expression, trying to figure out where and at what

point he would pull himself up in this process of establishing his dominion over another man. He, for his part, felt fine, sang, slept and laughed at me whenever the spirit moved him. Sometimes we would separate for two or three days; I would supply him with bread and money and tell him where he should wait for me. When we came together again he, having seen me off with suspicion and angry resentment, would welcome me joyously, triumphantly, and would always say, laughing:

“And I think you run avay on your own, leave me all alone! Ha, ha, ha!”

I would give him some food, tell him about the beautiful places I had seen and once, speaking of Bakhchisarai, told him about Pushkin and recited from his poem. All this made no impression on him whatsoever.

“Oh, verses! Zat is songs, not verses! I knew a man once, a Georgian, 'ee could sing songs! Zey vere real songs!... 'Ee would begin to sing—ay, ay, ay!... Loud... verry loud 'ee sang! As if someone vere twisting a dagger about in 'ees gullet!... 'Ee knifed inn-keeper. Gone Siberia now.”

Every time I returned to him I fell still lower in his estimation, and he could not conceal this from me.

Our affairs were going badly. I could hardly find opportunities to earn even one-and-a-half rubles a week and, of course, that was very far from sufficient for two. Shakro's collections saved us nothing in our expenditure on food. His stomach was a small abyss which swallowed everything indiscriminately—grapes, melons, salt fish, bread, dried fruits—and as time went by it seemed to become still more capacious and to require more and more victims.

Shakro began to hurry me to leave the Crimea, reasonably confronting me with the fact that it was already autumn and we still had far to go. I agreed with him. Besides, I had already seen all I wanted of that part of the Crimea, and so we went on towards Theodosia in the hopes of "raking in" some "cash", of which we were now quite devoid.

Having walked about twenty versts on from Alushta, we halted for the night. I had persuaded Shakro to walk along the coast, although it was a very long way round, but I wanted to breathe the sea air. We lit a fire and lay down beside it. It was a glorious evening. The dark green sea broke on the rocks down below us; the pale blue sky kept a solemn silence above, and all around the trees and bushes were rustling quietly. The moon was rising. Shadows fell from the lacy green of the plane-trees. A bird was singing boldly, melodiously. Its silver trills melted in an air alive with the gentle, caressing sound of the waves and, when they faded, the nervous chirping of some insect at once became audible. The fire blazed merrily and its flame seemed a great flaring bouquet of red and yellow flowers. These, too, cast their own shadows and these shadows leapt around as merrily as though they were showing off their vivacity to the lazy shadows of the moon. The whole extent of the sea's horizon was deserted, the sky above it cloudless, and I felt as though I were sitting on the edge of the earth contemplating empty space—that most enchanting of mysteries.... A timorous feeling of being on the verge of something inexpressibly vast filled my soul, and my very heart beats were hushed in awe.

Suddenly, Shakro burst out into a loud guffaw:

"Ha, ha, ha.... Vat a stoopid face you 'ave on!
Ex-ectly like zee sheep! A ha, ha, ha!..."

I was as startled as though a clap of thunder had suddenly resounded right over my head. But it was worse than that. It was funny, yes, but—how it hurt my feelings!... He, Shakro, was crying with laughter; I was on the verge of tears for quite a different reason. There was a great lump in my throat, I was speechless and could only stare at him with popping eyes which, of course, made him laugh all the more. He rolled about on the ground holding his stomach; I still could not get over the insult. I had suffered a very real injury and those few who, I hope, will understand what I was going through—because they themselves, perhaps, have experienced something of the same sort—will be able to perceive its full enormity.

"Stop it!!!" I yelled at him, furiously.

He jumped with fright but still could not pull himself together and paroxisms of laughter continued to overwhelm him, he puffed out his cheeks, his eyes bulging and then suddenly collapsed in a fresh bellow of laughter. Then I got up and walked away from him. I walked for a long time, without a thought in my head, almost without awareness of any kind, brimming with the burning poison of my injury. I had opened my heart to embrace the whole of Nature and silently, with all my soul, I had been telling Her how I loved Her with the ardent love of a man who has something of the poet in him, and Nature, in the person of Shakro, had burst out laughing at me for my moment of self-surrender! I would have gone far in compiling a deed of accusation against Nature, Shakro and life in general, had not swift steps sounded behind me.

"Be not angry!" Shakro pronounced shyly,

gently touching my shoulder. "You vere saying prayers? I did not know."

He spoke in the timid tone of a guilty little boy and, in spite of my emotional state, I could not help seeing his pathetic face, comically distorted by shame and fear.

"I vill never 'urt you again. Truly! Never!"

He shook his head vehemently.

"I see—you are 'umble. You work. Don't make me to work, I vonder—Vy? Must be—because 'ee's stoopid, like zee sheep."

So there he was comforting me! There was he apologising to me! Of course, after such comfort and such apologies there was nothing left for me to do but to forgive him not only for the past, but for all that was yet to come.

Half an hour later he was already sound asleep and I was sitting beside him, looking at him. In sleep even a strong man appears weak and defenceless—Shakro was pitiable. The puffy lips and arched brows gave his face a childish look of shy surprise. He breathed evenly, calmly, but sometimes he would begin to toss and talk in his sleep, speaking rapidly on a note of entreaty in Georgian. Around us reigned that tense silence which invariably awakes a feeling of expectation and which, if it went on for long enough, would send a man crazy by the absolute quality of the stillness and the absence of all sound, that vivid shadow of movement. The quiet whispering of the waves did not reach us—we were in a kind of pit overgrown with clinging bushes and resembling the gaping ragged jaws of some petrified beast. I looked at Shakro and thought:

"He is my travelling companion.... I could leave him here, but I shall never get away from him, for his name is legion.... He is my travelling

companion for all my life.... He will walk beside me to the edge of the grave....”

Theodosia did not come up to our expectations. When we arrived, there were some four hundred others who, like us, had hoped to find work and who had had to be satisfied with the part of spectators of the building of the pier. The workmen on the job were Turks, Greeks, Georgians, Russians from Smolensk and Ukrainians from Poltava. Everywhere in the town and its outskirts there wandered in groups the grey, depressed figures of the “famine-ridden”, and tramps from the Crimea and the Sea of Azov moved amongst them with a wolf-like lope.

We went on to Kerch.

My travelling companion kept his word and gave up bating me; but he was very hungry and gnashed his teeth like a wolf when he saw anyone eating, and horrified me by his descriptions of the amount of various foods which he would gladly have swallowed. For some time now he had begun to recall women. First in passing—with sighs of regret, then more frequently, with the gloating smiles of “a man of zee East”, and then, finally, had let himself go to such a degree that he could not let a single female pass by, whatever her age or appearance, without sharing with me some lascivious practical or philosophical comment on one or other of her points. He spoke of women so freely, with such knowledge of the subject, and looked at them from such an astonishingly single-minded point of view, that it made me feel like washing my mouth out.... Once I tried to prove to him that women were in no way his inferiors but, seeing that not only was he thoroughly offended at me for my opinions, but was even prepared to lose his temper over the humiliation to which, in his view, I was subjecting him, I

decided to leave off these attempts until he was better fed.

We headed for Kerch not round the coast but across the steppe in order to shorten the road, for we had nothing in our pack but one oat-cake weighing about three pounds which we had bought from a Tatar for our last five kopeks. Shakro's efforts to beg bread in the villages led to nothing. Everywhere people answered briefly: "Can't feed you all!" This was nothing but the truth: in that difficult year there really were an appalling number of people searching for a bite of bread.

My travelling companion could not abide the famine refugees—rivals in the collection of alms. His vital reserves, in spite of the hard road and poor nourishment, would not permit of his acquiring such a drained and pathetic appearance as about of which they could boast as of a kind of perfection and, seeing them coming from afar, he would say:

"Again zey come! Phoo, phoo, phoo! Vy do zey come? Vy do zey travel about? Is zere in all Russia so little place? I do not understand! Verry stoopid people, zee Russians."

When I explained the causes which sent the stupid Russian people wandering across the Crimea in search of bread, he would shake his head unbelievingly and reply:

"Don't understand! 'Ow eez it possible!... In Georgia vee do not 'ave such foolishnesses!"

We arrived in Kerch late in the evening and had to spend the night on the shore under the scaffolding of the quay. It was better that we should remain in hiding. We knew that, not long before our arrival, all the superfluous inhabitants had been deported from Kerch and, as tramps, we were afraid of getting mixed up with the police; moreover, as Shakro was travelling on somebody

else's passport, this could have led to serious complications in our careers.

The waves at high tide sprayed us generously with foam, at dawn we crept out from the scaffolding damp and chilled. All day we wandered about the wharves and all that we managed to earn was one small coin slipped me by a priest's wife for carrying a bag of melons from the market.

It was necessary to cross the bay to Taman! Not one boatman would agree to take us across as oarsmen, however much I implored them to do so. All were prejudiced against the tramps who, not long before our arrival, had earned themselves all too great a reputation in these parts and, not without reason, they classed us among them.

When evening fell, angry at our lack of success and at the world in general, I made up my mind to a somewhat risky undertaking and, with the onset of night, I proceeded to put it into execution.

IV

That night, Shakro and I quietly approached the customs post near which three sloops were moored by chains to iron rings screwed into the stone wall of the embankment. It was dark, there was a wind blowing, the sloops bumped against one another and the chains were clanking. It was easy for me to loosen one of the rings and pull it out of the stone.

Some ten feet above our head the excise sentry walked up and down whistling between his teeth. When he halted anywhere close to us I would stop working, but this was a superfluous precaution; he could not be expected to suppose the presence of a man below him sitting up to his

neck in water. Besides, the chains kept up a continuous clanking without any help from me. Shakro was already stretched out in the bottom of the boat and whispering something at me, the sense of which I could not catch because of the noise of the waves. The ring came away in my hands. A wave took the boat and carried it away from the bank. I held the chain and swam alongside it, then clambered on board. We took up two of the planks from the floor of the boat and, fixing them into the rollocks in place of oars, we rowed away....

The waves were in a lively mood and Shakro, sitting at the tiller, now disappeared from my gaze altogether, now rose high above me, and, with a loud cry, almost came falling down on top of me. I advised him not to cry out if he did not want to be heard by the sentry. Then he fell silent. I saw his face as a white blur. He held the tiller all the way. We had no time to exchange positions and we were frightened to move about in the boat. I called out to him what course to set and he, understanding what I wanted at once, did everything as deftly as a born sailor. The planks acting for oars were of little help to me. The wind was behind us and I did not pay any particular attention to where we were drifting but just tried to keep the prow pointing towards the opposite bank. It was easy to guess where this was because we could still see the lights of Kerch. The waves peered in at us over the sides of the boat and muttered angrily; the further we drifted out into the bay the higher they rose. In the distance there sounded a positive roaring of water, wild and full of menace.... And the boat drifted on—quicker and quicker. It was becoming very difficult to keep on course. Now we slithered down to the bottom of deep pits, now we were tossed up to

the summit of great hills of water, and the night grew darker and darker, the clouds coming ever lower. The lights at our stern disappeared in the darkness and then things became really frightening. It seemed as though there were no limit to this expanse of angry water. There was nothing to be seen but the waves flying towards us out of the darkness. They knocked one plank out of my hand and I myself threw the other onto the floor of the boat and held onto the sides firmly with both hands. Shakro emitted a wild yell every time the boat leapt upwards. I felt weak and helpless in this darkness, surrounded by the wrathful element and deafened by its noise. Without hope, a prey to bitter despair, I saw nothing but those waves with their whitish crests breaking in salty spray, and the clouds above me, dense, ragged, were themselves like waves.... I understood one thing only: everything that was going on around me was potentially immeasurably more furious and more terrible, and I was somehow offended that it seemed to be holding back and did not wish to show its full power. Death was inevitable. But it was essential that its impartial, all-levelling sway should be somehow aestheticised, made more acceptable—it was so coarsely matter-of-fact, so hard to accept. If I were given the choice between burning in flames or drowning in a quagmire, I should do my best to choose the former—it is somehow a more worthy ending.

.....

“Let us ‘oist a sail!” shouted Shakro.

“Where are you going to get a sail from?” I asked.

“Out of my coat....”

“Throw it here! Don’t let go the tiller!...”

Shakro began a silent struggle in the bows.

“ ‘Old it!’”

He threw me his coat. Crawling painfully along the bottom of the boat, I tore another plank from the floor, pushed it through the sleeve of the strongly woven garment, propped it against the seat, braced my legs and had just caught hold of the other sleeve and a part of the hem when something quite unexpected happened.... The boat leapt particularly high then shot downwards and I found myself in the water, holding the coat in one hand and grasping the rope looped round the outside of the boat with the other. The waves broke noisily over my head and I was swallowing the bitter, salt water. It had filled my ears, mouth, nose.... Clinging firmly to the rope, I bobbed up and down in the water, bumping my head against the side of the boat and, flinging the coat back over the bottom of the overturned boat, struggled to heave myself back on after it. One of a dozen or so efforts was successful, I straddled the boat and immediately caught sight of Shakro who was somersaulting about in the water, both hands grasping the very rope which I had just released. It appeared that it passed round the whole boat, threaded through the iron rings on the sides.

“Alive!” I shouted at him.

He jumped high out of the water and flopped down across the bottom of the boat. I reached out to help him up and for a moment we were face to face with one another. I was sitting astride the boat as though it were a horse, my feet thrust into the tow-ropes as into stirrups—but the pose was insecure: any wave might have knocked me out of the saddle. Shakro was gripping my knees with his hands and had buried his face in my chest. He was trembling from head to foot and I could hear his teeth chattering. Something had to

be done. The bottom of the boat was as slippery as though it had been oiled. I told Shakro that he must lower himself back into the water, holding onto the rope on one side, and that I would do the same on the other. Instead of answering he began butting his head into my chest. Every now and again the wild dance of the waves would send them leaping over us and we could hardly maintain our hold; the rope was cutting terribly into one of my legs. Throughout my field of vision great hills of water were heaving into being and vanishing noisily.

I repeated what I had just said in the tone of an order. Shakro began to butt his head into my chest still more violently. There was no time to lose. I tore his hands loose from me one after the other and began to push him into the water, trying to make him catch the rope. And then something happened which frightened me more than anything else which had taken place that night.

"You want to drown me?" whispered Shakro, and looked into my face.

That really was terrifying! The question itself was terrifying, still more so the tone of the question in which there sounded a meek submission, and a plea for mercy, and the last sigh of a man who had lost all hope of escaping a fatal issue. But most terrifying of all were the eyes in the deathly-pale, wet face!...

I yelled at him: "Hold on!" and lowered myself into the water, holding the rope. My leg struck against something and at first I could understand nothing for the pain of it. But then I did understand. Something hot surged up within me. I became intoxicated and felt myself strong as never before. . . .

"Land!" I yelled.

Possibly great seafarers on the discovery of new lands shouted this word with more feeling than I, but I doubt that they shouted it any louder. Shakro let out a whoop and cast himself into the water. But soon we had both sobered: the water was still up to our chests and no more solid signs of dry land were anywhere to be seen. Fortunately, I had not let go of the boat. And so Shakro and I took up our positions one on each side of it and, holding onto the saving ropes, cautiously proceeded in an unknown direction, leading the boat behind us.

Shakro was muttering something and laughing. I was looking anxiously about me. It was dark. Behind and to the right of us the sound of the waves was louder, ahead and to the left—softer; we set off to the left. The bottom was firm, sandy, but full of sudden pitfalls; sometimes we could not touch bottom and had to paddle with our legs and one arm, holding onto the boat with the other; at others the water was only up to our knees. In the deep places Shakro howled and I trembled with fright. Then, suddenly—we were saved! Ahead of us shone out a light.

Shakro began to yell for all he was worth; but I very well remembered that the boat was state property and lost no time in reminding him of this. He fell silent, but in a minute or two he began to sob. I could not comfort him—there was no comfort.

The water grew shallower . . . up to the knees . . . the ankles. Still we dragged the government boat; but there came a moment when we no longer had the strength and we let it go. A kind of black, withered tree trunk lay across our way. We jumped over it and both of us landed bare-footed on some kind of prickly grass. It was painful and, on the part of the earth, scarcely

hospitable, but we took no notice of that and set out at a run towards the light. It was about a mile away from us and, flaming merrily, seemed to be laughing to meet us.

V

... Three enormous, shaggy dogs, leaping out of somewhere in the darkness, flung themselves upon us. Shakro, who had been sobbing fitfully all the time, emitted a howl and fell flat upon the ground. I threw the wet coat at the oncoming dogs and bent down, feeling with my hand for a stone or a stick. There was nothing, only the grass cut my hand. The dogs made a concerted attack. I whistled for all I was worth, thrusting two fingers into my mouth. They jumped back and immediately we heard the tramping feet and raised voices of running men.

A few minutes later we were at the fire in a circle of four shepherds clad in sheepskins, the wool outermost.

Two sat on the ground smoking, one, a tall man with a thick black beard in a tall fur hat such as are worn by Cossacks, stood behind us leaning on a staff with an enormous knot of root at the end; the fourth, a sandy-headed youngster, was helping the weeping Shakro to undress. About five yards outside the circle the earth was covered by a thick layer of something grey and billowy, resembling spring snow which has just begun to thaw. Only after looking carefully for some time was it possible to distinguish the separate forms of sheep, closely huddled together. There must have been several thousand there, compressed by sleep and the darkness of the night into a dense, warm, thick strata of the

steppe. From time to time they would bleat, plaintively and nervously. . . .

I dried the coat and told the shepherd everything as it had really happened, and told them also how I had come by the boat.

"Where is it, that boat?" asked the stern grey-headed old man, who had never taken his eyes off me as I spoke.

I told him.

"Go, Mikhail. Take a look!"

Mikhail—the one with the black beard, shoudered his staff and set out for the shore.

Shakro, trembling with cold, asked me to give him the warm but still wet coat, but the old man said:

"Wait! Run about a little first to warm your blood. Run round the fire, up with you!"

Shakro did not immediately understand but then he suddenly jumped up and, naked, began to dance a wild dance, flying like a ball over the fire, twirling around on one spot, stamping his legs on the ground, yelling at the top of his voice, waving his arms. It was a killing sight. two of the shepherds were rolling about on the ground, laughing for all they were worth, while the old man, his face unmoved and serious, tried to clap out the rhythm of the dance but could not catch it and, his eyes, glued to Shakro's gyrations, kept shaking his head, twitching his moustache and crying out in a deep bass voice:

"Hai-ha! So-so! Hai-ha! Butz-butz!"

Illumined by the light of the fire, Shakro writhed like a snake, now hopping on one foot, now tapping rhythmically with both, and his body, gleaming in the light of the fire, became covered with great drops of sweat which appeared red as blood.

Now all three shepherds were clapping and I,

trembling with cold, was drying myself at the fire and thinking that today's adventure should have been sheer joy for a lover of Fenimore Cooper or Jules Verne. shipwreck, hospitable aborigines and barbarous dancing around a campfire. . . .

Now Shakro was already sitting on the ground huddled up in his coat and eating something, glancing up at me with black eyes which held a sparkle I did not quite like. His clothing was drying out hung on sticks thrust into the earth close to the fire. I was also given some bread and salted lard.

Mikhail returned and sat down beside the old man without a word.

"Well?" asked the old man.

"The boat's there!" answered Mikhail briefly.

"It won't wash away?"

"No!"

And they all fell silent, staring at me.

"Well," asked Mikhail, not addressing anybody in particular, "should we take them to the Ataman* in the village? Or maybe—straight to the excisemen?"

No one answered. Shakro ate unconcernedly.

"We could take them to the Ataman . . . or to the excisemen for that matter. . . . One's as good as t'other. . . ."

"Wait a bit, grandad. . . ." I began.

But he took absolutely no notice of me.

"So that's the way it is! Mikhail! The boat's there?"

"Uhu, it's there. . . ."

"So—and the water won't wash it away?"

"No, it won't."

"Then, let it stay there and tomorrow the

* *Ataman*—Cossack headman; administrator of a village in time of peace, commanding officer when service is required of the semi-regular Cossack levies—*Ed.*

boatmen'll go over to Kerch an' they can take it with them. Why shouldn't they take an empty boat along with them? Eh? So that's that.... And now you... you raggety lads... did you... how should I put it, now?... Did you get a fright, the pair of you? No? Tee-hee!... But another half-a-verst and you'd 've been out in the open sea. What'ld you've done then, if you'd 'a been thrown out into the sea? Ah? You'd 've gone to the bottom, like stones, the both of you. Drowned you'd 've been! And no more to it."

The old man fell silent and looked at me with a sarcastic smile lurking in his moustaches.

"Well, nothing to say for yourself, laddie?"

I was fed up with his deliberations, the drift of which I had failed to grasp and had taken as a form of mockery.

"I'm listening to you!" I said, somewhat edgily.

"Well, and what do you make of it?" the old man wanted to know.

"Neither head nor tail."

"Now then, now then, what're you showing yer teeth for? Think it's all in order to snap and snarl at yer elders and betters, do you?"

I said nothing.

"Don't you want any more to eat, now?" continued the old man.

"No."

"Well, don't then. Nobody's forcing you. But perhaps you might take a bit of bread for the road, like?"

I started with joy but did not give myself away.

"For the road, I might..." I said calmly.

"Ehey!... Give 'em some bread for the road and some of that there lard. And maybe there's something else there, too? If there is, let them have it...."

"Are we letting 'em go then?" asked Mikhail. The other two raised their eyes to the old man. "Well, and what'd they find to do here with us?"

"But we thought we might take them to the Ataman... or if not—to the excisemen," remarked Mikhail in a disappointed voice.

Shakro stirred in his place near the fire and inquisitively poked his head out from the coat. He was undismayed.

"What'd they find to do with the Ataman? There's nothing there for them, as I reckon. They can go and see him later.... If they want."

"What about the boat then?" insisted Mikhail.

"The boat?" The old man batted question for question. "What about the boat? Is it there?"

"It is," replied Mikhail.

"Well, let it stay there, then. And in the morning Ivashka can take it to the moorings. And from there someone'll take it over to Kerch. There's nothing else we *can* do with the boat."

I watched the old shepherd intently and could not detect the least movement in his phlegmatic, sunburnt and weathered face, over which the shadows of the fire were leaping.

"As long as no ill comes of it unexpected-like later on..." Mikhail began to give way.

"If you don't let your tongues run away with you, I don't see why ill should come of it. And if we take them to the Ataman, it's my opinion that it'll mean trouble for us and them. What we want's to attend to our own business and what they want is—to walk. Eh! Have you far left to walk?" asked the old man, although I had already told him how far.

"To Tiflis...."

"A long road! There you see, and the Ataman'll delay them; and if he delays them, when'll

they arrive? Better let 'em keep going to where they want to get to. Ah?"

"Why not, then? Let 'em go on!" the old man's comrades agreed when, having concluded his slow remarks, he tightly compressed his lips and looked round at them all questioningly, fingering his grey-black beard.

"Well, God go with you, lads!" The old man made a gesture of dismissal. "And the boat we'll send back where it belongs. All right?"

"Thank you, grandfather!" I took off my cap.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"Thank you, brother, thank you!" I repeated, very moved.

"What are you thanking me for? Here's a queer thing! I say—God go with you, and he says—thank you! You weren't afraid I'd send you to the devil, were you? Eh?"

"Guilty—I was!" I admitted.

"Oh!..." And the old man raised his brows. "Now why should I send a man on that bad road? Better send him the way I'd rather be treading myself. Who knows ... we may meet again, and then ... we'll be old acquaintances, like. We all need a bit of help at one time or another. ... 'Bye, now!..."

He pulled off his shaggy sheepskin cap and bowed to us. His comrades bowed too. We asked them the way to Anapa and set out.

Shakro was laughing at something....

VI

"What are you laughing at?" I asked him.

I was delighted with the old shepherd and his philosophy of life, I was delighted with the fresh

wind blowing up before the dawn straight into our faces and because the sky was cloudless, because soon the sun would rise in a clear sky and the brilliant, handsome god of a new day would be born. . . .

Shakro winked at me cunningly and burst out laughing even louder. I smiled, too, hearing his healthy, merry laughter. All that was left of our exhausting journey after two or three hours at the shepherds' fire and the tasty bread and lard was a slight aching in our bones; but this sensation did not mar our good spirits.

"Well, what are you laughing at? Glad to have come out of it alive, are you? Alive, and with a full stomach into the bargain?"

Shakro shook his head, nudged me vigorously with his elbow, pulled a face, burst out laughing again and eventually spoke out in his execrable Russian:

"You not understand, vy it is funny? No? I vill tell you! You know vat I do if zey 'ad taken us to zat Ataman-excise-man? You don' know? I tell on you: 'ee wanted to drown me! And I begin to cry. Zen zey are sorry for me and do not put me in prison! Understand?"

To begin with I wanted to take this as a joke—but—alas!—he was able to persuade me that his intention had been perfectly serious. He persuaded me of this so clearly and convincingly that, instead of losing my temper with him for his naive cynicism, I was filled with a feeling of profound pity for him. What else is it possible to feel for a man who, with the brightest of smiles and in the most sincere tones, informs you of his intention to kill you? What was there to be done about him, if he looked on this act as an endearing witty joke?

I hotly began to prove to Shakro all the immo-

rality of his intention. He replied very simply that I do not understand his true interests and forget that he is living with a false passport and that for that—no one was going to pat him on the back....

Suddenly, I was struck by a cruel thought....

"Wait a moment," I said, "do you mean to say you believe that I really did want to drown you?"

"No!... Ven you push me into ze vatter, zen I believe, ven you vent in yourself—I stopped."

"Thank God for that!" I cried out. "Well, I suppose I must say thank you!"

"No, do not say tank you! I say you tank you. Back there, at ze fire, you were cold, I was cold too. Ze coat was yours—but you did not take eet. You dried eet, gave eet me. And for yourself—you took nothing. So I say tank you! You are very good man—I understand. Ven vee come to Teeflees—you vill be paid back for everything. I vill take you to my farver. Say to my farver—'ere is ze man! Give 'im to eat, give 'im to drink, and me—to zee donkeys in zeir stables! Zat is vat I shall say! You vill leeve with us, you vill be a gardener, vill drink vine, eat all you vant!... Akh, akh, akh!... A vonderful life you vill 'ave! Very simple!... Eat from ze same dish, I vill say, drink from ze same cup as I!..."

He launched into a long and detailed description of the delights of the life he intended to arrange for me in Tiflis. And to the sound of his talking I thought of the great misery of those people who, armed by a new morality, by new aspirations, have outstripped their contemporaries and are forced to travel in the company of those who are alien to them, incapable of under-

standing them. . . . Life is hard for these lonely people! They are above the earth, in the air. . . . But they hover there like seeds of good corn, however seldom they may fall in fruitful soil. . . .

It was growing light. Near the horizon, the sea was already sparkling with pinkish gold.

"I vant sleep!" said Shakro.

We halted. He lay down in a hollow formed by the wind in the dry sand near the shore and, covering himself from head to heels in the big coat, soon went to sleep. I sat beside him and watched the sea.

It was living a life of its own, full and free, animated by powerful movement. Herd upon herd of waves rolled noisily up onto the shore and broke over the sand which hissed quietly as it absorbed the water. Tossing their white manes, the leading waves flung themselves noisily in a frontal attack along the shore and slithered back defeated, only to be met by others, coming up in support. Locked in a firm embrace, all foaming and frothing, they rolled up the shore again and beat upon it in an effort to extend the borders of their being. From the horizon to the shore, over all the expanse of the sea, rose these strong and supple waves and kept rolling in, on and on massed together and bound one to another by a common purpose. . . . The sun illumined their crests more and more brightly and those of the distant waves on the horizon appeared blood-red. Not one drop was wasted or lost without trace in that titanic movement of massed water which seemed as though animated by a conscious purpose which it was on the point of achieving by these wide and rhythmical blows. It was fascinating to watch the splendid courage of the leaders

dashing themselves bravely against the silent shore, and it was grand to watch how, calmly and solidly behind them, followed the whole sea, the mighty sea, already dyed by the sun in all the colours of the rainbow and fully aware of its own beauty and strength. . . .

Cutting through the waves, a great steamer sailed out from behind the promontory, rocking stately on the heaving bosom of the sea, riding the crests of the great waves which flung themselves angrily against its sides. Beautiful and powerful, its metal shining in the sun, it might at any other time have called to mind how the proud works of man can impose his will upon the elements. . . . But at my side lay sleeping a man who was himself the element.

VII

We walked on through the Terek district. Shakro was torn and ragged to an almost unbelievable degree and was devilishly ill-tempered, even though he no longer went hungry as there were no plenty of opportunities for earning. He had shown himself to be quite unadapted for any form of work. Once he did try forking the straw discarded by the threshing machine but he laid off at midday, having rubbed bleeding blisters on the palms of his hands. Another time we tried weeding and he grazed the skin off his neck with a hoe.

Our progress was fairly slow—two days working to one day on the road. Shakro ate without any self-control and, because of his greed, I could not save enough money to buy him so much as a part of a new outfit of clothing, whereas all

riegated holes held together by ill-stitched, multi-coloured patches.

Once, in some village or other, he found and removed from my pack five rubles which, with great difficulty and in secret from him, I had managed to save, and appeared that evening in the house where I was working in the kitchen garden, drunk and in the company of a fat Cossack woman who hailed me with the greeting:

“Good on you, damned heretic!”

And when, startled by this appellation, I asked her why I was to be accounted a heretic, she replied with aplomb:

“Because, you devil you, you forbid the poor lad to make love to women! How can you forbid what the law allows? Anathema, that’s what you are!...”

Shakro stood beside her and nodded agreement. He was very drunk, and the least movement set him rocking as though he were coming unscrewed at the joints. His lower lip was pendulous. His dull eyes seemed to be trying to outstare me with empty persistence.

“Now then, you, what are you gaping at us like that for? Hand over his money!” shouted the woman, very daring.

“What money?” I asked, amazed.

“Come on, come on! Or I’ll have you to the courthouse. Hand over that hundred and fifty rubles you took from him in Odessa!”

What was I to do? That damned woman in her drunken state might well have gone to the courthouse and then the village administration, hard on all kinds of vagrants, would have arrested us. Who knows what the consequences of such an arrest might have been for me and Shakro! So I began to use diplomatic means to get round

the woman, which did not cost me any great effort. Somehow or other, with the help of three bottles of wine, I managed to placate her. She collapsed on the ground amongst the water-melons and went to sleep. I put Shakro to bed and early in the morning of the following day he and I quit the village, leaving the woman amongst the water-melons.

Half sick from hangover, his face all crushed and swollen, Shakro kept on spitting and heaving great sighs. I tried to talk to him but he did not answer and only shook his shaggy head like a sheep.

We were following a narrow footpath along which little red snakes were crawling back and forth, slithering about under our feet. The stillness which reigned all around was conducive to drowsy day-dreaming. Black flocks of clouds were moving slowly up the sky behind us. Merging together they covered the whole of the sky behind us when before us all was clear, although tatters of clouds had torn away from the main body and were blowing merrily on ahead, overtaking us. Somewhere in the distance there was a grumble of thunder and its growling roars were coming nearer and nearer. Drops of rain were falling. The grass was rustling like tin-foil.

There was no shelter. It was dark now and the rustle of the grass sounded louder, more fearful. There was a clap of thunder—and the clouds shuddered, flaming with blue light. Heavy rain came streaming down, and one after another the claps of thunder kept up a perpetual roaring over the deserted steppe. The grass, bent by gusts of wind and rain, lay flat along the earth. Everything was trembling, nervously aware. The lightning tore the clouds in blinding flashes.... In

its brilliant, blue light loomed a distant range of mountains, glittering with blue flames, silver and cold, then, when the lightning went out, it disappeared as though swallowed up by the abyss of the dark. All around was a roaring, trembling echoing womb of sounds. It was as though the sky, turgid and angry, was undergoing a process of purification by fire from all the dust and filth emanating from the earth, and the earth, it seemed, was trembling before its wrath.

Shakro was whimpering like a frightened dog. As for me, I was seized with a kind of gaiety, swept up above the everyday world by the contemplation of this mighty, sombre panorama of a storm over the steppe. Divine chaos carried me away and induced a heroic mood, enveloping the soul in stormy harmony....

I was overcome by the desire to participate in the storm, to find some outlet for the overflowing awe and wonder touched off in me by its power. The blue fire which had set the whole sky aflame, was, it seemed, alight in my own breast; and—well, how was I to express my vast excitement and my rapture? I began to sing—loudly, with all my might. The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, the grass rustled and I sang and felt myself utterly at one with all the other sounds.... I was beside myself; it cannot be held against me, for I was doing no harm to anyone but myself. Storm at sea, thunder over the steppe! I know no more grandiose manifestations of nature.

And so I shouted aloud, in the firm conviction that I would not be disturbing anyone by such conduct and that I was running no risk of having my actions subjected to criticism. Suddenly, however, my legs were jerked sharply from under me and, involuntarily, I sat down in a puddle....

Shakro was looking into my face with serious and angry eyes.

"You are out of your senses? You are not? No? Zen—shu-ut up! Not to screech! I tear your troat open! Understand?"

I was amazed and began by asking him in what way I had disturbed him.

"You frighten me! Understand? Ze tunder —zat is God speaking, an' you shout 'im down. . . . Vat you tink?"

I told him that I had a perfect right to sing if I wanted to, just as he had.

"But I do not vant," he declared categorically.

"Then don't!" I conceded.

"And you don't neither!" Shakro exhorted me severely.

"No, I feel like singing. . . ."

"Now listen—vat you tink?" Shakro began on a note of fury. "Oo are you? 'Ave you a 'ouse? 'Ave you a muvver? Farver? 'Ave you any relations? Land? 'Oo are you in zis world? You are a man, you tink? It is I—zee man! I 'ave everything!" He slapped his chest. "I am prince! And you. . . . you—are nutting! Nutting at all! I am known in Kutaisi, in Tiflis! . . . Understand? You no go against me! You serve me?—You vill be content! I pay you ten times over! You do zis for me? You cannot do any uzzer; you say yourself zat God commanded to serve all men witout reward! I reward you! Vy-for do you torment me? Preach at me, frighten me? You vant, I become like you? Zat is not good! Ugh, ugh, ugh! . . . Tphoe! tphoe! . . ."

He talked, smacked his lips, spat, snorted, sighed. . . . I looked into his face, my mouth open with astonishment. He was evidently pouring forth all the accumulated outrages, injuries and humiliations he had suffered at my hands

since the beginning of our journey. To lend weight to his arguments, he kept poking his finger into my chest and shaking me by the shoulder and, at particularly powerful moments, pressed his whole great carcass down on me. The rain poured down upon us, incessant peals of thunder broke over our heads and Shakro, in order to make himself heard, was shouting at the top of his voice.

The absurdity of my position was what struck me most and made me burst out laughing to split my sides....

Shakro, spitting expressively, turned away from me.

VIII

The nearer we came to Tiflis, the more thoughtful and gloomy did Shakro become. Something new appeared in his emaciated but still impassive face. Not far from Vladikavkaz we came to a Circassian village and hired ourselves out there to harvest sweet-corn.

After two days working with the Circassians who hardly spoke any Russian and spent their time laughing at us and cursing us in their own language, we decided to leave the village, unheeded by the increasingly hostile attitude of its inhabitants. Some ten versts on from the village, Shakro suddenly pulled out from under his shirt a length of Lezghin chiffon and showed it to me a triumph, announcing:

"No more need to work! Vee sell—buy all vee need! It vill take us until Tiflis! Understand?"

Grated to the point of fury, I snatched the material from him and threw it aside, glancing over my shoulder. Circassians are not to be trifled with. Not long before we had heard the follow-

ing story from some Cossacks: one tramp on leaving the village where he had been working, had taken with him an iron spoon. The Circassians overtook him, found the spoon and, slitting open his stomach with a dagger, pushed the spoon deep into the wound and then rode calmly off leaving him out on the steppe where the Cossacks picked him up as a dying man. He told them the story and died on the way to their village. The Cossacks had warned us sternly against the Circassians more than once, telling us other stories which painted a similar moral—and I saw no reason to disbelieve them.

I reminded Shakro of this. He stood before me listening and suddenly, without a word, baring his teeth and narrowing his eyes, he sprang at me like a cat. For about five minutes we had a thorough free for all, till finally Shakro shouted angrily:

“Enough!”

Exhausted, we sat opposite one another in silence for some time. Shakro looked wistfully in the direction that I had thrown the stolen chiffon and launched into speech:

“Vy vee fight? Pa, pa, pa!... Very stoopid. Did I steal from you? You sorry to see I ’ave ze cloth? I sorry for you, zat is vy I steal.... You are ze one ’oo must work, I am not able.... Vat am I to do? I wanted to ’elp you....”

I tried to explain to him the meaning of theft.

“Please, shu-ut up! You ’ave ’ead like the wood....” He was contemptuous of me and explained: “If you are dying—vill you steal zen? Vell! And do you call zis life? Shut up!”

Afraid of angering him again, I said nothing. This was the second case of theft. Before, when we had been on the Black Sea, he had taken some

pocket scales from a Greek fisherman. Then, too, we had almost come to blows

"Vell—vee go on?" he asked, when we had calmed down, made things up and rested.

We went on. With every passing day his mood grew blacker and he looked at me strangely from under knitted brows. Once, when we had already crossed the Daryal ravine and were descending the Gudaur, he began:

"In a day or two—vee come to Teeflees. T'cc, tcc!" He clicked his tongue and beamed expansively. "I come 'ome: vere 'ave you been? I 'ave been travelling! I go to zee steam bath... aha! I vill eat much... ah, much! I say to my muvver—I much vant to eat! I vill say to my farver—forgive me! I 'ave seen much sorrow, I 'ave seen life—all kinds! Tramps are very good people. Eef I meet one, I give 'im a ruble, take 'im to zee inn, say drink vine, I 'ave been a tramp! I vill tell my farver.... Zat man—'ee vas as an elder bruvver to me.... 'Ee preach at me. 'Ee beat me, ze dog!... 'Ee feed me. Now, I vill say, you feed 'im for zat. Feed 'im for a year! For a year—as long as zat. You 'ear, Maxim?"

I liked to listen when he spoke in this way; in such moments there was something simple, child-like about him. Such speeches were also of interest to me because I knew no one in Tiflis and winter was setting in—on the Gudaur we had already met with snow. To some extent, I was counting on Shakro.

We walked quickly. We came to Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Iberia. The following day we planned to reach Tiflis.

From afar, about five versts distant, I set eyes upon the capital of Caucasia, wedged between two mountains. The end of the road! I was happy about something, Shakro—indifferent. With dull

eyes he looked out ahead and spat hungry saliva, every now and again clasping at his stomach with a grimace of pain. He had risked eating raw carrot pulled by the wayside.

“You sink zat I—a Georgian nobleman—vill enter my city in daylight so, all ragged, dirty? Oh, no, no!—Vee vait until evening. ‘Alt!’”

We sat down by the wall of some empty building and, each rolling a last cigarette, shivering with cold, began to smoke. A bitter, strong wind was blowing down from the Georgian Military Highway. Shakro sat singing a sad song between his teeth. I thought of a warm room and of all the other advantages of a settled life over a vagrant existence.

“We go!” Shakro rose with the face of one who has made up his mind.

Darkness was falling. It was lighting-up time in the town. It was beautiful: gradually, one after another, the lights shone out in the gloom which had filled the valley and hidden the town.

“Ere, you give me zat *bashlyk** to ‘ide my face, or so I may perhaps be recognised by friends.”

I gave him the *bashlyk*. We were walking along Olginskaya Street. Shakro was whistling a decisive tune.

“Maxim! See zat tram-stop—Veriysky Bridge? You sit zere, vait! Please, vait, I call in vun ‘ouse, ask a friend about my people, farver, muver....”

“You’ll not be long?”

“Strait avay! Vun moment!”

He slipped swiftly into the mouth of a dark

* *Bashlyk*—a hood.—*Ed.*

and narrow alley, down which he disappeared—forever.

Never again was I to meet this man—the travelling companion of nearly four months of my life, but I often remember him with affection and real amusement.

He taught me much which is not to be found in thick folios written by the wise—for the wisdom of life is always more profound and all-embracing than the wisdom of men.

1894

CHELKASH*

The blue southern sky was so obscured by dust that it had a murky look. The hot sun stared down at the greenish sea as through a thin grey veil, and its rays found poor reflection in the water, churned up as it was by the strokes of oars, the propellers of steamers and the sharp keels of Turkish feluccas and other craft which ploughed the crowded harbour in all directions. The waves of the sea, crushed within their granite encasements by the enormous weights gliding over their surfaces, hurled themselves at the shore and the sides of the ships—hurled themselves growling and foaming, their flanks littered with all sorts of rubbish.

The clang of anchor chains, the clash of the buffers of goods cars, the metallic wail of sheets of iron being unloaded on to paving-stones, the dull thump of wood against wood, the clatter of carts, the whistles of steamships rising from a wail to a shriek, the shouts of stevedores, seamen and customs guards—all this merged to form the deafening music of the working day which surged rebelliously in the sky above the harbour, while from the earth below new waves of sound kept rising to meet it—now a rumble that shook the earth, now a crash that rent the sultry air.

* Gorky met the Odessa tramp, who served as the prototype of Chelkash, in a hospital in the city of Nikolayev. The tramp, who was a patient in the same ward, related to Gorky the incident described in the story *Chelkash*.—Ed.

The granite, the steel, the wood, the paving-stones, the ships and the people—everything was enveloped in the mighty sounds of this impassioned hymn to Mercury. But human voices could hardly be detected in the general chorus, so weak and even ridiculous were they. And the people themselves, they whose efforts had given birth to all this sound, were ridiculous and pitiable; their ragged dirty bodies were bent double under the loads on their backs as they scurried hither and thither in the dust and the heat and the noise, and they were as nothing compared with the steel leviathans, the mountains of merchandise, the clang ing railway cars, and all the other things which they themselves had created. The things of their own creating had enslaved them and robbed them of personality.

The gigantic ships lying with steam up whistled and hissed and heaved great sighs, and every sound they uttered was filled with mocking contempt for the drab and dusty creatures crawling over their decks to load their deep holds with the products of their servile labour. It made one laugh till the tears ran to see these long files of stevedores carrying thousands of poods of grain on their backs to be deposited in the iron bellies of the ships so that they themselves might earn a few loaves of bread to fill their own bellies. A poem of bitter irony could be read in the contrast between these ragged sweating men, stupefied by the heat, the noise, and the exhausting labour, and the powerful machines these men had made and which stood radiating well-being in the sunlight—machines which, when all is said and done, had been set in motion not by steam but by the blood and muscles of those who made them.

The noise was oppressive; the dust tickled the nose and got into the eyes; the heat scorched and

enervated the body, and everything seemed tense, as if the end of endurance had been reached and catastrophe was imminent, a tremendous explosion that would clear the air so that men might breathe freely and easily. And then silence would descend on the world and there would be no more dust and turmoil to deafen and irritate people and drive them mad; and the air of the town, of the sea, and of the sky would be fresh and clear and beautiful. . . .

Twelve measured strokes of a bell rang out. When the last brassy vibrations had died away the savage music of labour was found to have subsided, and a minute later it turned into a mere rumble of discontent. Now the voices of the people and theplash of the sea were more audible. It was the dinner hour.

I

When the stevedores stopped work and scattered over the docks in noisy groups to buy victuals from the vendors and find shady corners where they could squat on the pavement to take their meal, Grishka Chelkash put in an appearance. He was well known to all the dockers, a confirmed drunkard, a bold and clever thief. He was barefooted and bareheaded, had on a pair of threadbare corduroy trousers and a filthy cotton shirt with a torn collar that exposed a bony chest covered by brown skin. The matted state of his iron-grey hair and the crumpled look of his lean and hawk-like face indicated that he had just waked up. A straw had become caught in his moustache, another in the stubble of his left cheek, while behind his ear he had stuck a spring of linden. Long and lanky and a bit stooped, he

sauntered slowly down the cobbled street, turning his hooked nose from side to side and casting a glittering grey eye about him as he searched for someone among the dockers. His long dark moustache kept twitching like a cat's; he held his hands behind his back and kept rubbing them together and twisting his crooked grasping fingers. Even here, among hundreds of other roughs, he instantly attracted attention because of the resemblance to a steppe-hawk conveyed by his predatory leanness and aimful walk, which, like the flight of the bird of prey he resembled, concealed a tense alertness under an appearance of poised tranquillity.

As he came up to a group of stevedores sitting in the shadow cast by a pile of coal baskets, a stocky young chap, with a blotched and vapid face and with scratches on his neck suggesting a recent fight, got up to meet him. He fell into step beside Chelkash and said under his breath:

“The packhouse guards have discovered two bales of cloth missing. They’re searching.”

“So what?” Chelkash asked, calmly running his eyes over him.

“What d’ye mean ‘so what’? They’re searching, I tell you.”

“And you thought I might join in the search?”

Chelkash smiled and glanced at the packhouse.

“Go to hell!”

The chap turned back.

“Wait! Who gave you those beauty-marks? A pity to mess up your shop front like that! Seen Mishka?”

“Not for a long time,” called back the chap as he joined his comrades.

Everybody who met Chelkash greeted him as an old acquaintance, but he, usually so cheery

and biting, must have been out of sorts, for his replies were curt

From behind a pile of merchandise suddenly appeared a customs guard—dark-green, dusty, aggressively erect. He planted himself in front of Chelkash in a challenging pose, his left hand on the hilt of his dirk, his right reaching out for Chelkash's collar.

“Halt! Where you bound?”

Chelkash retreated a step, lifted his eyes to the guard's red face and gave a cool smile.

The face, wily but good-natured, tried to assume a dread aspect: the cheeks puffed out and turned purple, the brows drew together, the eyes rolled, and the effect on the whole was extremely comical.

“I told you once to keep away from these docks if you didn't want me to smash your ribs in, and here you are again!” he roared.

“Howdy, Semyonich! Haven't seen you for a long time,” said the imperturbable Chelkash, holding out his hand.

“I wouldn't cry if I didn't see you for another fifty years. Move on, move on.”

But he shook the extended hand.

“Here's what I wanted to ask,” went on Chelkash, holding the guard's hand in steel fingers and shaking it in an intimate sort of way. “Seen Mishka anywhere?”

“What Mishka? I don't know any Mishka. Move on, man, or the packhouse guard may see you and then—”

“The red-headed chap I worked with on the *Kostroma* last time,” persisted Chelkash.

“That you *thieved* with, you mean. They've put him in hospital, that Mishka of yours—got his leg crushed by some iron. Get out of here, I

tell you, get out before I throw you out by the scruff of the neck."

"Listen to that, now! And you said you didn't know no Mishka. What makes you so mean today, Semyonich?"

"None of your talk! Get out!"

The guard was getting angry; he glanced about him and tried to free his hand, but Chelkash held on to it as he looked at him calmly from under bushy eyebrows and went on talking:

"What's the rush? Don't you want to have a nice little chat with me? How you getting on? How's the wife and kiddies? Well?" His eyes twinkled and his teeth flashed in a mocking grin as he added: "Been wanting to drop in to see you for ever so long, but just can't seem to manage it. It's the drink—"

"Drop it, I tell you! None of your joking, you lanky lubber. I mean what I say. But maybe you're turning to house-breaking, or ~~robbing~~ people in the street?"

"Why should I? There's enough here to keep you and me busy a lifetime. Honest there is, Semyonich. But I hear you've snitched another two bales of clotch. Watch out, or you'll find yourself in trouble yet!"

Semyonich trembled with indignation and the saliva flew as he tried to talk. Chelkash let go of his hand and calmly strode off on his long legs to the dock gates. The guard followed at his heels, cursing him roundly.

Chelkash was in better spirits now; he whistled a tune through his teeth, thrust his hands into his pockets, and retarded his steps, tossing off well-aimed quips to right and left. He was paid in his own coin.

"Just see what good care of you the bosses are taking, Grishka!" called out a stevedore who was

stretched out on the ground with his comrades, taking a rest after their meal.

"Semyonich's seeing I don't step on any nails in my bare feet," replied Chelkash.

They got to the gates. Two soldiers ran their hands down Chelkash's clothes and pushed him out into the street.

He crossed the road and sat down on the curbstone opposite a pub. A line of loaded carts came thundering out of the dock gates, while a line of empty ones moved in the other direction, their drivers bouncing in their seats. The docks belched forth a roar of sound and clouds of dust that stuck to the skin.

Chelkash was in his element amid this mad welter. He was anticipating a good haul that night, a haul that would cost him little effort but require a great deal of skill. He did not doubt but that his skill was sufficient, and he screwed up his eyes with pleasure as he reflected on how he would spend all his banknotes the next morning. He thought of his pal Mishka. He needed him badly, and here he had gone and broken his leg. Chelkash cursed under his breath, for he feared he could not handle the job alone. What would the weather be like? He glanced up at the sky, then down the street.

Sitting on the pavement, his back against a hitching post some half a dozen paces away, was a young lad in a blue homespun shirt and trousers, with bast sandals on his feet and a torn brown cap on his head. Beside him lay a small bundle and a haftless scythe wrapped in straw and neatly tied with string. The lad was sturdy, broad-shouldered, fair-haired, his face was tanned by wind and sun, and he had large blue eyes that stared amiably at Chelkash.

Chelkash bared his teeth, stuck out his tongue, made a frightful face and stared back with popping eyes.

The boy blinked in astonishment at first, then he burst out laughing, calling out between spasms: "Crazy as a loon!" Without getting up, he hitched along the curbstone to where Chelkash was sitting, dragging his bundle through the dust and allowing the tip of his scythe to clank over the cobbles.

"Been on the booze, eh?" he said to Chelkash, giving a tug at his trousers.

"You're right, baby-face, you're right," confessed Chelkash with a smile. He was instantly drawn to this wholesome good-natured chap with eyes as clear as a baby's. "Been hay-making?"

"Yes. Made hay, but no money. Times are bad. You never saw so many people! They all come drifting down from the famine districts. No point in working for such pay. Sixty kopeks in the Kuban, think of that! They say they used to pay three or four rubles, or even five."

"Used to! They used to pay three rubles just to get a look at a Russian! That's how I earned a living ten years ago. I'd come to a Cossack village: 'Here I am, folks, an honest-to-God Russian!' They'd all crowd round, look me over, poke me, pinch me, oh-and-ah and pay me three rubles. Give me food and drink besides and invite me to stay as long as I liked."

At first the boy opened wide his mouth, an expression of wondering admiration on his round face, but as he realised Chelkash was fabricating, he snapped his mouth shut, then burst out laughing again. Chelkash kept a straight face, hiding his smile in his moustache.

"A queer bird you are, talking talk as if it was

God's truth and me swallowing it. But honest to goodness, it used to be—”

“Isn't that just what I was saying? It used to be—”

“Oh, come!” said the boy with a wave of his hand. “What are you, a cobbler, or a tailor, or what?”

“Me?” Chelkash mused awhile and then said: “I'm a fisherman.”

“A fisherman? Think of that! So you catch fish, do you?”

“Why fish? The fishermen here don't only catch fish. Mostly dead bodies, old anchors, sunken boats. There's special fish-hooks for such things.”

“Lying again. Maybe you're one of those fishermen who sing:

*We cast our nets
Upon the shores,
In market stalls, in open doors.*

“Ever met fishermen like that?” asked Chelkash, looking hard at the boy and grinning.

“No, but I've heard about them.”

“Like the idea?”

“Of people like that? Why not? At least they're free; they can do what they please.”

“What's freedom to you? Do you hanker after freedom?”

“Of course. What could be better than to be your own boss, go where you like and do what you like? Only you've got to keep straight and see that no millstones get hung round your neck. Outside of that, go ahead and have a good time without a thought for anything save God and your conscience.”

Chelkash spat contemptuously and turned away.

“Here's what I'm up against,” went on the boy.

"My father died without leaving anything much, my mother's old, the land's sucked dry. What am I supposed to do? I've got to go on living, but how? God knows. I have a chance to marry into a good family. I wouldn't mind if they'd give the daughter her portion. But they won't. Her old man won't give her an inch of land. So I'd have to work for him, and for a long time. For years There you are. If only I could lay hands on, say, a hundred and fifty rubles I'd be able to stand up to her father and say: 'Do you want me to marry your Marfa? Are you giving land to her? You aren't? Just as you say; she's not the only girl in the village, thank God.' I'd be independent, see? and could do what I liked." The boy heaved a sigh. "But it looks as if there was nothing for it but to go and slave for him as his son-in-law. I thought I'd bring back a couple of hundred rubles from the Kuban. That would be the thing! Then I'd be a gentleman! But I didn't earn a damn thing. Nothing for it but to be a farm-hand. Can't do anything with my own land. So there you are."

The boy squirmed and his face fell at the prospect of slaving for that man.

"Where you bound now?" asked Chelkash.

"Home. Where else?"

"How do I know? Maybe you're bound for Turkey."

"Turkey?" marvelled the boy. "What honest Christian would ever go to Turkey? A fine thing to say!"

"You *are* a blockhead," murmured Chelkash, turning away again. Yet this wholesome village lad had stirred something in him; a vague feeling of dissatisfaction was slowly taking form within him, and this kept him from concentrating his mind on the night's task.

The boy, offended by Chelkash's words, muttered to himself and threw sidelong glances at the older man. His cheeks were puffed up in a droll way, his lips were pouting and his narrowed eyes blinked rapidly. Evidently he had not expected his talk with this bewhiskered ruffian to end so suddenly and so unsatisfactorily.

But the tramp paid no more attention to him. His mind was on something else as he sat there on the curbstone whistling to himself and beating time with a dirty toe.

The boy wanted to get even with him.

"Hey, you fisherman! Do you often go on a bout?" he began, but at that moment the fisherman turned to him impulsively and said:

"Look, baby-face, would you like to help me to do a job tonight? Make up your mind, quick!"

"What sort of job?" asked the boy dubiously.

"What sort! Whatever sort I give you. We're going fishing. You'll row."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind doing that, I'm not afraid of work. Only—what if you get me into trouble? You're a queer egg; there's no seeing inside you."

Chelkash felt as if his insides had been scalded.

"Don't go about shooting your mouth off," he said with cold animosity. "Maybe a good crack over the head will help you see."

He jumped up, his eyes flashing, his left hand pulling at his moustache, his right clenched in a hard and corded fist.

The boy was frightened. He glanced quickly about him and then he, too, jumped up, blinking nervously. The two of them stood there silently measuring each other with their eyes.

"Well?" said Chelkash harshly. He was seething inside, twitching all over from the insult taken from this puppy he had held in such

contempt so far, but whom he now hated with all his soul because he had such clear blue eyes, such a healthy tanned face, such short sturdy arms; because he had a native village and a house there, and an offer to be the son-in-law of a well-to-do muzhik; he hated him for the way he had lived in the past and would live in the future, but most of all he hated him because he, a mere child as compared with Chelkash, dared to hanker after a freedom he could neither appreciate nor have need of. It is always unpleasant to discover that a person you consider beneath you loves or hates the same things you do, thereby establishing a certain resemblance to yourself.

As the lad looked at Chelkash he recognised in him a master.

"I don't really—er—mind," he said. "After all, I'm looking for work. What difference does it make whether I work for you or somebody else? I just said that because—well, you don't look much like a workingman. You're so—er—down at heel. But that can happen to anybody, I know. God, haven't I seen drunks before? Plenty of them, some even worse than you."

"All right, all right. So you're willing?" said Chelkash in a milder tone.

"With pleasure. State your price."

"The price depends on the job. How much we catch. Maybe you'll get five rubles."

Now that the talk was of money, the peasant wanted to be exact and demanded the same exactness from the man who was hiring him. Once more he had his doubts and suspicions.

"That won't suit me, brother."

Chelkash played his part.

"Don't let's talk about it now. Come along to the tavern."

And they walked down the street side by side,

Chelkash twirling his moustache with the air of a master; the lad fearful and distrusting, but willing to comply.

"What's your name?" asked Chelkash.

"Gavrilla," answered the lad.

On entering the dingy, smoke-blackened tavern, Chelkash went up to the bar and in the off-hand tone of a frequenter ordered a bottle of vodka, cabbage soup, roast beef and tea; he repeated the list and then said nonchalantly: "On tick," to which the barman replied by nodding silently. This instantly inspired Gavrilla with respect for his employer, who, despite his disreputable appearance, was evidently well known and trusted.

"Now we'll have a bite and talk things over. Sit here and wait for me; I'll be right back."

And he went out. Gavrilla looked about him. The tavern was in a basement; it was dark and damp and filled with the stifling smell of stale vodka, tobacco smoke, pitch, and something else just as pungent. A drunken red-bearded sailor smeared all over with pitch and coal-dust was sprawling at a table opposite him. Between hiccups he gurgled a song made of snatches of words which were all sibilant one minute, all guttural the next. Evidently he was not a Russian.

Behind him were two Moldavian women. Swarthy, dark-haired, ragged, they too were wheezing out a drunken song.

Out of shadows loomed other figures, all of them noisy, restless, dishevelled, drunken....

Gavrilla was gripped by fear. If only his boss would come back! The noises of the tavern merged in a single voice, and it was as if some huge multiple-tongued beast were roaring as it vainly sought a means of escape from this stone

pit. Gavrilla felt a depressing intoxication slowly creeping over him, making his head swim and his eyes grow hazy as they roved the tavern with fearful curiosity.

At last Chelkash came back and the two men began to eat and drink and talk. Gavrilla was drunk after his third glass of vodka. He felt very gay and was anxious to say something nice to this prince of a chap who had treated him to such a fine meal. But somehow the words that surged in his throat would not come off his tongue, suddenly grown thick and unwieldy.

Chelkash looked at him with a condescending smile.

"Stewed? Ekh, you rag! On five swigs. How are you going to work tonight?"

"Ol' pall!" lisped Gavrilla. "Don't be 'fraid. I'll show you. Gimme a kiss, c'mon."

"That's all right. Here, take another guzzle."

Gavrilla went on drinking until he reached the point at which everything about him seemed to be moving up and down in rhythmic waves. This was unpleasant and made him sick. His face wore an expression of foolish solemnity. Whenever he tried to say anything, his lips slapped together comically and garbled sounds came through them. Chelkash twisted his moustache and smiled glumly as he gazed at him abstractedly, his mind on something else.

Meanwhile the tavern was roaring as drunkenly as ever. The red-headed sailor had folded his arms on the table and fallen fast asleep.

"Time to go," said Chelkash, getting up.

Gavrilla tried to follow him but could not; he let out an oath and laughed idiotically, as drunks do.

"What a wash-out!" muttered Chelkash, sitting down again.

Gavrilla kept on laughing and looking at his boss with bleary eyes, while Chelkash turned a sharp and thoughtful eye on him. He saw before him a man whose fate he held in his wolfish paw. Chelkash sensed that he could do what he pleased with him. He could crush him in his hand like a playing-card, or he could help him get back to the solid peasant way of life. Conscious of his power over him, he reflected that this lad would never have to drink the cup it had been the fate of him, Chelkash, to drink. He envied and pitied the boy; he despised him, and yet he was sorry to think that he might fall into other hands, no better than his own. In the end, Chelkash's various emotions combined to form a single one that was both fatherly and practical. He pitied the boy and he needed him. And so he took Gavrilla under the arms and lifted him up, giving him little pushes with his knee as he led him out into the tavern yard where he laid him down in the shade of a wood-pile, he himself sitting beside him and smoking his pipe. Gavrilla tossed about awhile, gave a few grunts and fell asleep.

II

“Ready?” whispered Chelkash to Gavrilla, who was fussing with the oars.

“In a minute. The rowlock's loose. Can I give it a bang with the oar?”

“No! Not a sound! Push it down with your hands; it'll slip into place.”

Both of them were noiselessly busy with a boat tied to the stern of one of a fleet of freight-boats loaded with oaken staves and of Turkish feluccas carrying palm and sandal wood and thick cypress logs.

The night was dark, heavy banks of tattered clouds floated across the sky, the sea was calm and black and as heavy as oil. It gave off a moist saline odour and made tender little noises as it lapped at the shore and the sides of ships, causing Chelkash's boat to rock gently. At some distance from shore could be seen the dark outlines of ships against the sky, their masts tipped by varicoloured lights. The sea reflected these lights and was strewn with innumerable yellow spots that looked very beautiful quivering upon the background of black velvet. The sea was sleeping as soundly as a workman who has been worn out by the day's labour.

"Let's go," said Gavrilla, dipping an oar into the water.

"Let's." Chelkash pushed off hard with the steering oar, sending the boat into the lanes between the feluccas. It glided swiftly over the water, which gave off a blue phosphorescent glow wherever the oars struck it and formed a glowing ribbon in the wake of the boat.

"How's your head? Ache?" asked Chelkash solicitously.

"Something fierce. And it's heavy as lead. Here, I'll wet it."

"What for? Wet your insides; that'll bring you round quicker," said Chelkash, holding out a bottle.

"Ah, God be thanked."

There was a gurgling sound.

"Hey! That's enough!" interrupted Chelkash.

Once more the boat darted forward, weaving its way among the other craft swiftly and soundlessly. Suddenly it was beyond them, and the sea—the mighty boundless sea—stretched far away to the dark-blue horizon, from which sprang billowing clouds: grey-and-mauve with fluffy

yellow edges, greenish, the colour of sea water and leaden-hued, throwing dark and dreary shadows. Slowly moved the clouds across the sky, overtaking each other, merging in colour and form, dissolving, only to reappear again in new aspects, grimly magnificent. There was something fatal in the slow movement of these inanimate forms. It seemed as if there were endless numbers of them at the rim of the sea, and as if they would go on crawling across the sky for ever, impelled by a vicious desire to keep the sky from gazing down upon the slumbering sea with its millions of golden orbs, the many-hued stars, that hung there alive and pensively radiant, inspiring lofty aspirations in the hearts of men to whom their pure shine was a precious thing.

"Nice, the sea, isn't it?" asked Chelkash.

"I suppose so, but it makes me afraid," said Gavrilla as he pulled hard and evenly on the oars. The water let out a faint ring and splash as the oars struck it, and it still gave off that blue phosphorescent glow.

"Afraid! You *are* a boob," grunted Chelkash.

He, a thief, loved the sea. His nervous, restive nature, always thirsting for new impressions, never had enough of contemplating its dark expanses, so free, so powerful, so boundless. And he resented such a tepid response to his question about the beauty of the thing he loved. As he sat there in the stern of the boat letting his steering oar cut through the water while he gazed calmly ahead, he was filled with the one desire to travel as long and as far as he could over that velvety surface.

He always had a warm expansive feeling when he was on the sea. It filled his whole being, purging it of the dross of daily life. He appreciated this and liked to see himself a better man here

among the waves and in the open air, where thoughts about life lose their poignancy and life itself loses its value. At night the soft breathing of the slumbering sea is wafted gently over the waters, and the sound fills the heart of man with peace, crams away its evil impulses, and gives birth to great dreams.

“Where’s the fishing tackle?” asked Gavrilla suddenly, glancing anxiously about the boat.

Chelkash gave a start.

“The tackle? I’ve got it here in the stern.”

He did not wish to lie to this green youth and he regretted having his thoughts and feelings dispelled in this abrupt way. It made him angry. Again he had that burning sensation in his throat and chest and said to Gavrilla in a hard and impressive voice:

“Listen, sit where you are and mind your own business. I hired you to row, so you row; and if you start wagging your tongue it will go hard with you. Understand?”

The boat gave a little jerk and came to a halt, the oars dragging and stirring up the water. Gavrilla shifted uneasily on his seat.

“Row!”

A fierce oath shook the air. Gavrilla lifted the oars and the boat, as if frightened, leaped ahead in quick nervous spurts that made the water splash.

“Steady!”

Chelkash half rose without letting go of the steering oar and fastened cold eyes on Gavrilla’s white face. He was like a cat about to spring as he stood there bent forward. The grinding of his teeth could be heard, as could the chattering of Gavrilla’s teeth.

“Who’s shouting there?” came a stern cry from out at sea.

"Row, you bastard! Row! Shhh! I'll kill you, damn your hide! Row, I tell you! One, two! Just you dare to make a sound! I'll rip you to pieces!" hissed Chelkash.

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God!" murmured Gavrilla, trembling with fear and exertion.

The boat swung round and went back to the harbour where the ships' lanterns formed clusters of coloured lights and their masts stood out distinctly.

"Hi! Who's shouting?" came the cry again.

But it came from a distance now. Chelkash was reassured.

"It's you who's shouting!" he called back, then turned to Gavrilla who was still muttering a prayer.

"Luck's with you this time, lad. If those devils had chased us it would have been all over with you. I'd have fed you to the fishes first thing."

Seeing that Chelkash had calmed down and was in a good humour, the trembling Gavrilla pleaded with him:

"Let me go; for the love of Christ, let me go. Set me down somewhere. Oi, oi, oi, I've been trapped! For God's sake, let me go. What do you want of me? I can't do this. I've never been mixed up in such business. It's the first time. God, I'm lost for sure. How did you get round me? It's a sin. You'll pay for it with your soul. Oh, what a business!"

"Business?" asked Chelkash sharply. "What business?"

He was amused by the boy's terror; he took pleasure in contemplating it and in thinking what a ferocious fellow he himself was.

"Bad business, brother. Let me go, for the love of God. What do you need me for? Come, be a good chap—"

"Hold your tongue! If I didn't need you I wouldn't have brought you, understand? So shut up!"

"Dear God," murmured Gavrilla.

"Stop blubbering," Chelkash cut him off sharply.

But Gavrilla could no longer control himself; he whimpered softly, coughed, sniffled, wriggled, but rowed with a strength born of despair. The boat flew ahead like an arrow. Once more they found themselves surrounded by the dark forms of ships. Their boat became lost among them as it turned and twisted through the narrow lanes of water.

"Listen, you! If you get asked any questions, keep your mouth shut if you value your life, understand?"

"God!" breathed Gavrilla, adding bitterly: "I'm a lost man."

"Stop blubbering," whispered Chelkash again.

This whisper robbed Gavrilla of his mental power; he was benumbed by a chill premonition of disaster. Like one in a trance he dropped his oars into the water, threw himself backwards as he pulled, lifted them and dropped them again, his eyes fixed steadily on his bast sandals.

The sleepy splash of the waves was dreary and terrifying. Now they were in the docks. From the other side of a stone wall came the sound of human voices, of singing and whistling and a splashing of water.

"Stop," whispered Chelkash. "Put down your oars. Push with your hands against the wall. Shhh, damn you!"

Gavrilla guided the boat along the wall by holding on to the slippery masonry. The boat moved without a sound, the slime on the stones deadening the sound of its bumping.

"Stop. Give me the oars; give them to me, I say. Where's your passport? In your bundle? Let's have it. Hurry up. That's to keep you from running away, pal. No danger of that now. You might have run away without the oars, but not without your passport. Wait here. And mind, if you so much as squeak, I'll find you if it's at the bottom of the sea!"

And then, pulling himself up by his hands, Chelkash disappeared over the wall.

It happened so quickly that Gavrilla gave a little gasp. And then the heaviness in his heart and the fear inspired by that lean bewhiskered thief fell from him like a garment. Now he would run away! Drawing a free breath, he glanced round. To his left rose a black hull without a mast, a sort of gigantic coffin, empty and abandoned. Every time the waves struck it, it let out a hollow sound that might have been a groan. To the left was the slimy wall of the breakwater, a cold heavy serpent uncoiled upon the sea. Behind him loomed other dark forms, while ahead, in the opening between the wall and the coffin, he got a glimpse of the empty sea with black clouds banked above it. Ponderous, enormous, they moved slowly across the sky, spreading horror in the darkness, threatening to crush human beings with their great weight. Everything was cold, black, sinister. Gavrilla was frightened. And his present fear was greater than that inspired by Chelkash. It clamped him tightly round the chest, squeezing all resistance out of him and pinning him to his seat.

Everything was quiet. Not a sound was to be heard but the sighing of the sea. The clouds moved as slowly and drearily as ever, and so many of them rose out of the sea that the sky was like a sea itself, an agitated sea turned upside

down over this smooth, slumbering one. The clouds were like waves whose foamy crests were rushing down upon the earth, rushing back into the chasms out of which they had sprung, rushing upon the new-born billows which had not yet broken into the greenish foam of savage fury.

So oppressed was Gavrilla by the austere silence and beauty about him that he was anxious to have his master come back. What if he should not come? Time dragged slowly—slower than the movement of the clouds across the sky. And the longer he waited, the more menacing grew the silence. But at last a splash, a rustle, and something like a whisper came from the other side of the breakwater. Gavrilla felt that he would die in another minute.

"Hullo! Asleep? Here, catch this. Careful," came the muffled voice of Chelkash.

Something square and heavy was let down over the wall. Gavrilla put it in the boat. A similar bundle followed. Then the lanky form of Chelkash slid down, the oars appeared, Gavrilla's bundle fell at his feet, and Chelkash, breathing hard, took his seat in the stern.

Gavrilla gave a diffident smile of joy.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Ra-ther! Well, lay on the oars. Pull with all your might. You've earned a neat little sum. Half the job's over; all you've got to do now is slip past those bastards and then—collect and go back to your Mashka. I s'pose you've got a Mashka, haven't you?"

"N-no." Gavrilla was putting forth his best effort, his lungs working like bellows, his arms like steel springs. The water gurgled under the boat and the blue ribbon in its wake was wider than before. Gavrilla became drenched in sweat but he did not let up on the oars. Twice that night

he had a great fright; he did not wish to have a third one. The only thing he wanted was to get this accursed job over as quickly as possible, set foot on dry land and escape from that man while he was still alive and out of jail. He resolved not to talk to him, not to oppose him in any way, to do everything he ordered him to, and if he managed to get away safely, to say a prayer to St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker on the very next day. An impassioned prayer was ready on his tongue, but he held it back, panting like a locomotive and glancing up at Chelkash from under drawn brows.

Chelkash, long and lean, was crouching like a bird about to take wing, his hawklike eyes piercing the darkness ahead, his hooked nose sniffing the air, one hand clutching the steering oar, the other pulling at his moustache, which twitched as his thin lips spread in a smile. Chelkash was pleased with his haul, with himself, and with this youth whom he had terrorised and converted into his slave. As he watched Gavrilla exerting himself, he felt sorry for him and thought he would offer him a word of encouragement.

“Aha!” he said softly, with a little laugh, “got a good scare, did you?”

“Not so bad,” grunted Gavrilla.

“You can take it easier now. The danger’s over. There’s just one place more we’ve got to slip past. Take a rest.”

Gavrilla obediently stopped rowing, and dropped his oars into the water again.

“Row softly. Keep the water from talking. There’s a gate we’ve got to get past. Shhh. The men here can’t take a joke. Always ready with their guns. You’ll have a hole in your head before you know what’s struck you.”

Now the boat was gliding through the water

almost without sound. The only sign of its movement was the blue shine of the water dripping off the oars and the blue sparkles in the sea as the drops struck it. The night grew darker and stiller. The sky no longer resembled an agitated sea—the clouds had spread out to form a heavy blanket that hung low and immobile over the water. The sea was even more calm and black, its warm saline odour was stronger than ever, and it no longer seemed so boundless.

"If only it would rain!" murmured Chelkash. "It would hide us like a curtain."

Great forms rose out of the water to right and left of the boat. They were barges—dark and dreary and motionless. On one of them a light could be seen moving: someone was walking about with a lantern in his hand. The sea made little pleading sounds as it patted the sides of the barges, and they gave chill and hollow answers, as if unwilling to grant the favours asked of them.

"The cordon!" said Chelkash in a scarcely audible voice.

Ever since he had told Gavrilla to row softly, the latter had again been filled with apprehension. As he strained ahead into the darkness it seemed to him that he was growing—his bones and sinews ached as they stretched and his head ached, too, filled as it was with a single thought. The skin of his back quivered and he had a sensation of pins-and-needles in his feet. His eyes felt as if they would burst from straining so hard into the darkness, out of which he expected someone to rise up any minute and shout at them: "Stop, thieves!"

Gavrilla shuddered on hearing Chelkash say "The cordon." A dreadful thought flashed through his mind and struck upon his taut nerves: he thought of calling out for help. He even

opened his mouth, raised himself a little and took a deep breath, but suddenly, struck with horror as though with a lash, closed his eyes and slipped off the seat.

From out of the black waters rose a flaming blue sword of light; it rose and cleaved the darkness of night, cut through the clouds in the sky and came to rest on the bosom of the sea in a broad blue ribbon of light. There it lay, its rays picking the forms of ships, hitherto unseen, out of the darkness—black silent forms, shrouded in the gloom of night. It was as if these ships had lain for long at the bottom of the sea, to which they had been consigned by the forces of the storm, and now, at the will of this flaming sword born of the sea, they had been raised, that they might gaze on the sky and on all things that exist above water. The rigging of their masts was like clinging seaweed that had been brought up from the bottom of the sea along with the gigantic black forms it enmeshed as in a net. Then once again this fearsome blue sword rose, flashing, off the bosom of the sea, and once again it cleaved the night and lay down again, this time in another spot. And again the forms of ships which had not been seen before were illuminated by its light.

Chelkash's boat stopped and rocked on the water as if deliberating what to do. Gavrilla was lying in the bottom of the boat, his hands over his face, while Chelkash poked him with his foot and whispered savagely:

"That's the customs cruiser, you fool! And that's its spotlight. Get up. They'll spot us in a minute. You'll be the ruin of me and yourself as well, you idiot. Get up!"

A particularly effective kick in the back brought Gavrilla to his feet. Still afraid to open his eyes, he sat down, felt for the oars, and began to row.

"Easy! Easy, damn you! God, what a fool I picked up! What you afraid of, snout-face? A lantern—that's all it is. Easy with those oars, God damn you! They're searching for smugglers. But they won't catch us. They're too far out. Oh, no, they won't catch us. Now we're—" Chelkash looked about triumphantly "—we're out of danger. Phew! Well, you're a lucky devil, even if you are a blockhead."

Gavrilla rowed on, saying nothing, breathing heavily, stealing sidelong glances at the flaming sword that kept rising and falling. Chelkash said it was only a lantern, but he could not believe it. There was something uncanny about this cold blue light cleaving the darkness, giving the sea a silver shimmer, and once more Gavrilla was gripped by fear. He rowed mechanically, all his muscles taut as in expectation of a blow from above, and there was nothing he wanted now; he was empty and inanimate. The excitement of that night had drained everything human out of him.

But Chelkash was jubilant. His nerves, used to strain, quickly relaxed. His moustache twitched with gratification and his eyes sparkled. Never had he been in better humour; he whistled through his teeth, drew in deep breaths of the moist sea air, looked about him, and smiled good-naturedly when his eyes came to rest on Gavrilla.

A wind sprang up, rousing the sea and breaking up the surface into little ripples. The clouds grew thinner and more transparent but the whole sky was still covered with them. The wind rushed lightly back and forth across the sea, but the clouds hung motionless, as if deeply engrossed in drab, uninteresting thoughts.

"Come, snap out of it, brother. You look as if you'd had all the spirit knocked out of you; nothing but a bag of bones left. It's all over."

Gavrilla was glad to hear a human voice, even if it was Chelkash's.

"I'm all right," he murmured.

"You look it! Got no stuffings in you. Here, take the steering oar and let me row. You must be tired."

Gavrilla got up mechanically and changed places with him. In passing, Chelkash got a look at the boy's white face and noticed that his knees were trembling so that they could hardly hold him. This made him more sorry than ever for him, and he gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"Come, chin up! You did a good job. I'll reward you well for it. What would you say if I handed you twenty-five rubles?"

"I don't want anything. Nothing but to get ashore."

Chelkash gave a wave of his hand, spat, and began to row, swinging the oars far back with his long arms.

The sea was quite awake now. It amused itself by making little waves, ornamenting them with fringes of foam, and running them into each other so that they broke in showers of spray. The foam hissed and sighed as it dissolved, and the air was filled with musical sounds. The darkness seemed to have waked up, too.

"So now," said Chelkash, "you'll go back to your village, get married, start working the land, grow grain, your wife will bear children, there won't be enough to eat, and all your life you'll work yourself to the bone. What fun is there in that?"

"No fun at all," Gavrilla replied faintly and with a little shudder.

Here and there the wind tore rifts in the clouds, revealing patches of blue sky set with one or two stars. The reflection of these stars danced on

the water, now disappearing, now gleaming again.

"Bear more to the right," said Chelkash. "We're almost there. Hm, the job's over. A big job. Just think, five hundred rubles in a single night!"

"Five hundred?" repeated Gavrilla incredulously. Frightened by the words, he gave the bundles a little kick and said, "What's in them?"

"Things that are worth a lot of money. They'd bring in a thousand if I got the right price, but I can't be bothered. Slick, eh?"

"Good Lord!" said Gavrilla unbelievingly. "If only I had as much!" He sighed as he thought of his village, his wretched farm, his mother, and all those dear and distant things for whose sake he had set out in search of work; for whose sake he had undergone the tortures of that night. He was caught up in a wave of memories—his little village on the side of a hill running down to the river, and the woods above the river with its birches, willows, rowans, and birdcherry.

"How I need it!" he sighed mournfully.

"You don't say. I s'pose you'd jump straight on a train and make a dash for home. And wouldn't the girls be mad on you! Why, you could have any one of them you liked. And you'd build yourself a new house; although the money's hardly enough for a house."

"No, not for a house. Timber's dear up our way."

"At least you'd repair the old one. And what about a horse? Have you got a horse?"

"Yes, but it's a feeble old thing."

"So you'll need to buy a new horse. A first-rate horse. And a cow.... And some sheep. And some poultry, eh?"

"Ekh, don't mention it! Couldn't I set myself up fine!"

"You could, brother. And life would be like a song. I know a thing or two about such things myself. I had a nest of my own once. My father was one of the richest men in the village."

Chelkash was scarcely rowing. The boat was rocked by the waves splashing mischievously against its sides, and it made almost no progress through the dark waters, now growing more and more playful. The two men sat there rocking and looking about them, each absorbed in his own dreams. Chelkash had reminded Gavrilla of his village in the hope of quieting the boy's nerves and cheering him up. He had done so with his tongue in his cheek, but as he taunted his companion with remainders of the joys of peasant life, joys which he himself had long since ceased to value and had quite forgotten until this moment, he gradually let himself be carried away, and before he knew it he himself was expounding on the subject instead of questioning the boy about the village and its affairs.

"The best thing about peasant life is that a man's free, he's his own boss. He's got his own house, even if it's a poor one. And he's got his own land—maybe only a little patch, but it's his. He's a king, once he's got his own land. He's a man to be reckoned with. He can demand respect from anybody, can't he?" he ended up with animation.

Gavrilla looked at him curiously, and he, too, became animated. In the course of their talk he had forgotten who this man was; he saw in him only another peasant like himself, glued fast to the land by the sweat of many generations of forefathers, bound to it by memories of childhood; a peasant who of his own free choice had severed connections with the land and with labour on the land, for which he had been duly punished.

"True, brother. How very true! Look at you, now; what are you without any land? The land, brother, is like your mother; there's no forgetting it."

Chelkash came back to earth. Again he felt that burning sensation in his chest that always troubled him when his pride—the pride of a reckless dare-devil—was injured, especially if injured by someone he considered a nonentity.

"Talking rot again!" he said fiercely. "Did you think I meant what I said? Know your place, upstart!"

"But I didn't mean you," said Gavrilla with his former timidity. "There's lots of others like you. God, how many miserable people there are in the world! Homeless tramps."

"Here, take over the oars," snapped Chelkash, holding back the flood of oaths that surged in his throat.

Once more they exchanged places, and as Chelkash climbed over the bundles he had an irresistible desire to give Gavrilla a push that would send him flying into the water.

They did no more talking, but Gavrilla emanated the breath of the village even when he was silent. Chelkash became so engrossed in thoughts of the past that he forgot to steer, and the current turned the boat out to sea. The waves seemed to sense that this boat was without a pilot, and they played with it gleefully, tossing it on their crests and leaping in little blue flames about the oars. In his mind's eye Chelkash saw a kaleidoscope of the past, of the distant past, separated from the present by the gulf of eleven years of vagrancy. He saw himself as a child, saw his native village, saw his mother, a stout red-cheeked woman with kindly grey eyes, and his father, a stern-faced, red-bearded giant. He saw himself as a bridegroom,

and he saw his bride, the plump black-eyed An-fisa with a mild, cheerful disposition and a long plait hanging down her back. Again he saw himself, this time as a handsome Guardsman; again his father, now grey-haired and stooped with labour; and his mother, wrinkled and bent to earth. He saw the reception the village gave him when his army service was over, and he recalled how proud his father had been to show off this healthy, handsome, bewhiskered soldier-son to the neighbours. Memory is the bane of those who have come to misfortune; it brings to life the very stones of the past, and adds a drop of honey even to the bitterest potion drunk at some far time.

It was as if a gentle stream of native air were wafted over Chelkash, bringing to his ears his mother's tender words, his father's earnest peasant speech and many other forgotten sounds; bringing to his nostrils the fragrance of mother-earth as it thawed, as it was new-ploughed, as it drew on an emerald coverlet of springing rye. He felt lonely, uprooted, thrown once and for all beyond the pale of that way of life which had produced the blood flowing in his veins.

"Hey, where are we going?" cried Gavrilla.

Chelkash started and glanced about with the alertness of a bird of prey.

"Look where we've drifted, damn it all. Row harder."

"Daydreaming?" smiled Gavrilla.

"Tired."

"No danger of getting caught with them things?" asked Gavrilla, giving the bundles a little kick.

"No, don't worry. I'll turn them in now and get my money."

"Five hundred?"

"At least."

"God, what a pile! If only I had it! Wouldn't I play a pretty tune with it, just!"

"A peasant tune?"

"What else? I'd...."

And Gavrilla soared on the wings of his imagination. Chelkash said nothing. His moustache drooped, his right side had been drenched by a wave, his eyes were sunken and lustreless. All the hawkishness had gone out of him, had been wrung out of him by a humiliating introspection that even glanced out of the folds of his filthy shirt.

He turned the boat sharply about and steered it towards a black form rising out of the water.

Once more the sky was veiled in clouds and a fine warm rain set in, making cheerful little plopping sounds as its drops struck the water.

"Stop! Hold it!" ordered Chelkash.

The nose of the boat ran into the side of a barge.

"Are they asleep or what, the bastards?" growled Chelkash as he slipped a boat-hook into some ropes hanging over the side. "Throw down the ladder! And the rain had to wait till this minute to come down! Hey, you sponges! Hey!"

"Selkash?" purred someone on deck.

"Where's the ladder?"

"Kalimera, Selkash."

"The ladder, God damn you!"

"Oo, what a temper he's in tonight! Eloy!"

"Climb up, Gavrilla," said Chelkash to his companion.

The next minute they were on deck, where three bearded, dark-skinned fellows were talking animatedly in a lisping tongue as they stared over the gunwale into Chelkash's boat. A fourth, wrapped in a long chlamys, went over to Chelkash and shook his hand without a word, then threw Gavrilla a questioning look.

"Have the money ready in the morning," Chelkash said to him briefly. "I'm going to take a snooze now. Come along, Gavrilla. Are you hungry?"

"I'm sleepy," said Gavrilla. Five minutes later he was snoring loudly while Chelkash sat beside him trying on somebody else's boots, spitting off to one side and whistling a sad tune through his teeth. Presently he stretched out beside Gavrilla with his hands behind his head and lay there with his moustache twitching.

The boat rolled on the waves, a board creaked plaintively, the rain beat on the deck and the waves against the sides of the boat. It was all very mournful and reminded one of the cradle-song of a mother who has little hope of seeing her child happy.

Chelkash bared his teeth, raised his head, glanced about him, muttered something to himself and lay down again with his legs spread wide apart, making him look like a pair of giant scissors.

III

He was the first to wake up. He glanced anxiously about him, was instantly reassured, and looked down at Gavrilla, who was snoring happily, a smile spread all over his wholesome, sunburnt, boyish face. Chelkash gave a sigh and climbed up a narrow rope-ladder. A patch of lead-coloured sky peered down the hatchway. It was light, but the day was dull and dreary, as days often are in autumn.

Chelkash came back in a couple of hours. His face was red and his whiskers had been given a rakish twist. He was wearing a sturdy pair of high-boots, a leather hunting jacket and breeches

as a hunter wears. The outfit was not new, but in good condition and very becoming to him, since it filled out his figure, rounded off the edges and gave him a certain military air.

"Get up, puppy," said he, giving Gavrilla a little kick.

Gavrilla jumped up only half-awake and gazed at Chelkash with frightened eyes, not recognising him. Chelkash burst out laughing.

"Don't you look grand!" said Gavrilla with a broad grin at last. "Quite the gentleman."

"That don't take us long. But you're a lily-livered fellow if there ever was one. How many times were you about to pass out last night?"

"You can't blame me; I'd never been on a job like that before. I might have lost my soul."

"Would you do it again, eh?"

"Again? Well, I can't say. What would I get for it?"

"If you got, let's say, two smackers?"

"You mean two hundred rubles? I might."

"And what about losing your soul?"

"Maybe I wouldn't lose it after all," grinned Gavrilla. "I mightn't lose it, and I'd be made for the rest of my life."

Chelkash laughed gaily.

"Well, enough of joking; let's go ashore."

And so they found themselves in the boat again, Chelkash steering, Gavrilla rowing. Above them stretched a solid canopy of grey clouds; the sea was a dull green and it played joyfully with the boat, tossing it up on waves that had not yet grown to any size, and throwing handfuls of pale spray against its sides. Far up ahead could be glimpsed a strip of yellow sand, while behind them stretched the sea, chopped up into coveys of white-caps. Behind them, too, were the ships—

a whole forest of masts back there to the left, with the white buildings of the port as a background. A dull rumble coming from the port mingled with the roar of the waves to form fine strong music. And over everything hung a thin veil of fog that made all objects seem remote.

"Ekh, it'll be something to see by nightfall!" exclaimed Chelkash, nodding out to sea.

"A storm?" asked Gavrilla as he ploughed powerfully through the waves with his oars. His clothes were soaked with wind-blown spray.

"Uh-huh," said Chelkash.

Gavrilla looked at him inquisitively.

"Well, how much did they give you?" he asked at last, seeing that Chelkash had no intention of broaching the subject.

"Look." Chelkash pulled something out of his pocket and held it out.

Gavrilla's eyes were dazzled by the sight of so many crisp bright bank-notes.

"And here I was thinking you had lied to me! How much is it?"

"Five hundred and forty."

"Phe-e-w!" gasped Gavrilla, following the course of the notes back to the pocket with greedy eyes. "God! If only I had that much money!" and he gave a doleful sigh.

"You and me'll go on a big spree, mate," cried Chelkash ecstatically. "We'll paint the town red. You'll get your share, never fear. I'll give you forty. That enough, eh? Give it straight away if you want me to."

"All right, I'll take it if you don't mind."

Gavrilla was shaking with anticipation.

"Ekh, you scarecrow, you! I'll take it!" Here, go ahead and take it. Take it, damn it all. I don't know what to do with so much money. Do me a favour and take some of it off my hands."

Chelkash held out several notes to Gavrilla, who let go of the oars to clutch them in trembling fingers and thrust them inside his shirt, screwing up his eyes as he did so and taking in great gulps of air as if he had burnt his throat. Chelkash watched him, a mocking smile on his lips. Once more Gavrilla picked up the oars and began to row nervously, hurriedly, with his eyes cast down, like a man who is afraid. His shoulders and ears were twitching.

"You're a greedy bloke. That's no good. But what's to be expected?—you're a peasant," mused Chelkash.

"A man can do anything with money!" exclaimed Gavrilla in a sudden flare of excitement. And then hurriedly, incoherently, chasing his thoughts and catching his words on the fly, he drew the contrast between life in the village with money and without it. Honour, comfort, pleasure!

Chelkash followed him attentively, his face grave, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. From time to time he would give a pleased smile.

"Here we are!" he interrupted Gavrilla's tirade.

The boat was caught on a wave that drove it into the sand.

"Well, this is the end. We've only got to pull the boat up good and high so that it don't get washed away. Some people will come for it. And now it's good-bye. We're about eight versts from town. You going back to town?"

Chelkash's face was beaming with a sly and good-natured smile, as if he were contemplating something very pleasant for himself and very unexpected to Gavrilla. He thrust his hand into his pocket and rustled the notes there.

"No—I'm not going. I'm—I'm—" Gavrilla stammered as if choking.

Chelkash looked at him.

"What's eating you?" he said

"Nothing." But Gavrilla's face turned first red, then grey, and he kept shifting on his feet as if he wanted to throw himself at Chelkash or do something else of insuperable difficulty.

Chelkash was taken aback by the boy's agitation. He waited to see what would happen next.

Gavrilla broke into laughter that sounded more like sobbing. His head was hanging, so that Chelkash could not see the expression of his face, but he could see his ears going from red to white.

"To hell with you," said Chelkash with a disgusted wave of his hand. "Have you fallen in love with me, or what? Squirming like a girl. Or maybe you can't bear to part with me? Speak up, spineless, or I'll just walk off."

"You'll walk off?" shrieked Gavrilla.

The deserted beach trembled at the shriek, and the ripples of yellow sand made up by the washing of the waves seemed to heave. Chelkash himself started. All of a sudden Gavrilla rushed towards Chelkash, threw himself at his feet, seized him round the knees and gave him a tug. Chelkash staggered and sat down heavily in the sand; clutching his teeth, he swung up his long arm with the hand closed in a tight fist. But the blow was intercepted by Gavrilla's pleadings, uttered in a cringing whisper:

"Give me that money, there's a good fellow! For the love of Christ give it to me. What do you need with it? Look, in just one night—in one single night! And it would take me years and years. Give it to me. I'll pray for you. All my life. In three churches. For the salvation of your soul. You'll only throw it to the winds, while I? I'll put it in the land. Give it to me!"

What is it to you? It comes so easy. One night, and you're a rich man. Do a good deed once in your life. After all, you're a lost soul; there's nothing ahead of you. And I'd—oh what wouldn't I do with it! Give it to me!"

Chelkash—frightened, dumbfounded, infuriated—sat in the sand leaning back on his stiff arms; sat without a word, his eyes boring into this boy whose head was pressed against his knees as he gasped out his plea. At last Chelkash jumped to his feet, thrust his hand into his pocket and threw the notes at Gavrilla.

"Here, grab it!" he cried, trembling with excitement, with pity and loathing for this greedy slave. He felt heroic when he had tossed him the money.

"I was going to give you more anyway. Went soft last night thinking of my own village. Thought to myself: I'll help the lad. But I waited to see if you'd ask for it. And you did, you milk-sop, you beggar, you. Is it worth tormenting yourself like that for money? Fool. Greedy devils. No pride. They'd sell themselves for five kopeks."

"May Christ watch over you! Now I'm—you know what I am now? Why, I'm a rich man!" squealed Gavrilla, twitching all over in ecstasy and hiding the money inside his shirt. "Bless you, my friend. I'll never forget you. Never. And I'll have my wife and children say prayers for you, too."

As Chelkash heard his joyful squeals and looked at his beaming face distorted by this paroxysm of greed, he realised that, thief and drunkard that he was, he would never stoop so low, would never be so grasping, so lacking in self-pride. Never, never! And this thought and this feeling, filling him with a sense of his own freedom,

made him linger there beside Gavrilla on the shore of the sea

"You've made me a happy man," cried Gavrilla, snatching Chelkash's hand and pressing it to his own face.

Chelkash bared his teeth like a wolf but said nothing.

"And just to think what I almost did!" went on Gavrilla. "On the way here I thought—to myself—I'll hit him—you, that is—over the head—with an oar—bang!—take the money—and throw him—you, that is—overboard. Who'd ever miss him? And if they found his body—nobody'd bother to find out who did it and how. He's not worth making a fuss over. Nobody needs him. Nobody'd think twice about him."

"Hand over that money!" roared Chelkash, seizing Gavrilla by the throat.

Gavrilla wrenched away once, twice, but Chelkash's arm wound about him like a snake. The sound of a shirt ripping, and—there was Gavrilla flat on his back in the sand, his eyes popping out of his head, his fingers clutching the air, his feet kicking helplessly. Chelkash stood over him lean, erect, hawklike, his teeth bared as he gave a hard dry laugh, his whiskers twitching nervously on his sharp bony face. Never in all his life had he been wounded so cruelly, and never had he been so furious.

"Well, are you happy now?" he laughed, then turned on his heel and set off in the direction of the town. Before he had gone five steps Gavrilla arched himself like a cat, sprang to his feet, swung out with his arm and hurled a big stone at him.

"Take that!"

Chelkash let out a grunt, put his hands to his head, staggered forward, turned round to Gavril-

la, and fell on his face in the sand. Gavrilla was frozen with fear. Chelkash moved one leg, tried to lift his head, stretched out, trembling like a harp string. Then Gavrilla ran for all he was worth, ran out into the dark space where a shaggy black cloud was hanging over the fog-enshrouded steppe. The waves rustled as they scurried up the sand and seeped through it. The foam hissed and the air was filled with spray.

It began to rain. At first it came down in single drops, but soon turned into a shower that came pouring out of the sky in thin streams. These streams wove a net of watery threads that enveloped the whole expanse of the steppe, the whole expanse of the sea. Gavrilla was swallowed up in it. For a long time nothing was to be seen but the rain and the long figure of the man lying in the sand at the edge of the sea. Then Gavrilla came swooping like a bird out of the darkness. When he reached Chelkash he fell on his knees beside him and tried to lift him up. His hand came in contact with something warm and red and sticky. He shuddered and started back, with a wild expression on his white face.

"Get up, brother, get up!" he whispered in Chelkash's ear above the noise of the rain.

Chelkash opened his eyes and gave Gavrilla a little push.

"Go away," he whispered hoarsely.

"Brother! Forgive me! It was the devil's doings," whispered Gavrilla trembling as he kissed Chelkash's hand.

"Go away. Leave me."

"Take this sin off my soul. Forgive me, brother."

"Away! Go away! Go to hell!" Chelkash suddenly cried out and sat up in the sand. His face was white and angry, his eyes were hazy and

kept closing as if he were sleepy. "What else do you want? You've done what you wanted to do. Go away. Get out!" He tried to give the grief-stricken Gavrilla a kick, but he could not and would have collapsed again had not Gavrilla put an arm round his shoulders. Chelkash's face was on a level with Gavrilla's. Both faces were white and dreadful to see.

"Scum!" And Chelkash spat into the wide-open eyes of his companion.

Gavrilla humbly wiped his face on his sleeve.

"Do what you want to me," he whispered. "I won't say a word. Forgive me, in the name of Christ."

"Scum. Can't even do your dirty work like a man," cried Chelkash scathingly as he slipped his hand inside his jacket and ripped off a piece of shirt with which he silently bound his head, grinding his teeth from time to time. "Have you taken the money?" he asked through his teeth.

"I haven't, brother. And I won't. I don't want it. Nothing but bad luck comes of it."

Chelkash thrust his hand into a pocket of his jacket, pulled out the pile of notes, peeled off a hundred-ruble one, put it back into his pocket, and threw the rest at Gavrilla.

"Take it and go away."

"I won't, brother. I can't. Forgive me what I've done."

"Take it, I say," roared Chelkash, rolling his eyes fearfully.

"Forgive me. I can't take it if you don't," said Gavrilla humbly, falling at Chelkash's feet in the rain-drenched sand.

"That's a lie. You will take it, you scum," said Chelkash with conviction. Pulling up his companion's head by the hair, he thrust the money under his nose.

"Take it. Take it. You earned it. Don't be afraid, take it. And don't be ashamed that you almost killed a man. Nobody would hunt you down for killing a man like me. They'd even say thank you if they found out. Here, take it."

Seeing that Chelkash was joking Gavrilla's heart grew lighter. He clutched the money.

"And do you forgive me, brother? Please, do?" he begged tearfully.

"My dear friend," replied Chelkash in a mocking tone, as he got up and stood swaying on his feet. "What's there to forgive? Nothing to forgive. Today you get me; tomorrow I get you."

"Ah brother, brother," sighed Gavrilla disconsolately, shaking his head.

Chelkash stood in front of him with an odd smile on his face. The rag on his head, which had gradually been getting redder, resembled a Turkish fez.

The rain had become a downpour. The sea gave a low roar, the waves hurled themselves savagely at the shore.

The two men were silent.

"Well, good-bye," said Chelkash mockingly as he turned to go.

He staggered, his legs were shaking, and he held his head as if afraid of losing it.

"Forgive me, brother," pleaded Gavrilla once more.

"That's all right," said Chelkash coldly, setting off.

He stumbled away, holding his head with his left hand, pulling gently at his dark moustache with his right.

Gavrilla stood watching him until he disappeared in the rain which kept coming down in fine endless streams, enveloping the steppe in impenetrable steel-grey gloom.

Then he took off his wet cap, crossed himself, looked at the money in his hand, heaved a deep sigh of relief, hid the money in his shirt, and strode off firmly down the shore in the opposite direction to that taken by Chelkash.

The sea growled as it hurled its huge waves on the sand, smashing them to foam and spray. The rain lashed at the water and the land. The wind howled. The air was filled with a roar, a wail, a murmur. The rain cut off sight of sea and sky.

Soon the rain and the spray washed away the red spot on the sand where Chelkash had lain, washed away the footsteps of Chelkash, washed away the footsteps of the youth who had walked so bravely down the beach. And not a sign was left on this deserted shore to testify to the little drama enacted here by these two men.

OLD IZERGIL

I

These stories were told to me on the shore of the sea near Akkerman, in Bessarabia.

One evening, when our grape-picking was over for the day, the group of Moldavians with whom I had been working went down to the sea-shore, leaving me and an old woman named Izergil lying in the deep shadow of the grape-vines, silently watching the silhouettes of the people who had gone down to the shore merge with the blue shadows of night.

They sang and laughed as they went; the men were bronzed by the sun, they had thick black moustaches and curly hair that hung down to their shoulders, and they were wearing short jackets and wide trousers tight at the ankle; the girls and women were gay, they had dark-blue eyes and graceful bodies, and their skins were as bronzed as the men's. Their silky black hair hung loose and the warm breeze played with it, making the coins plaited into it tinkle. The wind flowed over us in a broad continuous current, but from time to time it seemed to come up against some obstacle, and then there would be a great gust that blew out the women's hair, making it stream about their heads in fantastic manes. This gave them the appearance of strange creatures out of fairy-tales. As they went farther and farther away, the night and my imagination clothed them in increasing beauty.

Someone was playing a violin, a girl was singing in a deep throaty voice, bursts of laughter could be heard. . . .

The air was heavy with the tang of the sea and the vapours rising from the earth, which had been drenched by rain just before nightfall. Even now tattered storm-clouds were floating across the sky in odd forms and colourings—here they were vague, like columns of smoke, grey and ashen-blue; there they were mottled black and brown and as sharp as fragments of rock. And between them gleamed the tender night sky dotted with gold. All of this—the sounds and the smells, the clouds and the people—was sad and beautiful and seemed to be the preface to a marvellous tale. It was as if everything had been checked in its growth and was dying. The sound of voices faded as they receded, becoming but mournful sighs.

“Why did you not go with them?” asked old Izergil, nodding in the direction of the sea.

She had become bent in two by time, her eyes, once shining black, were now dull and rheumy. And she had a strange voice—it sounded as if her tongue were made of crunching bone.

“I did not wish to,” I replied.

“You Russians are born old. All of you are as gloomy as demons. Our girls are afraid of you. But you, my lad, are young and strong.”

The moon came up. Large, round and blood-red, it seemed to have emerged from the bowels of that steppe which had swallowed up so much human flesh and blood; this, perhaps, was why it was so rich and fertile. The old woman and I were caught in the lacy shadow of the leaves as in a net. Across the steppe, which extended to our left, slitted cloud shadows made pale and transparent by the blue moonshine.

"Look, there goes Larra!"

I turned to where the old woman pointed a crooked shaking finger and saw the shadows moving—there were many of them, and one, darker than the others, was travelling faster; it was cast by a wisp of cloud sailing closer to the earth and more swiftly than its sisters.

"There is no one there," I said.

"You are blinder than me, an old woman. Look. Do you not see something dark fleeing across the steppe?"

I looked again, and again saw nothing but shadows.

"It is only a shadow. Why do you call it Larra?"

"Because it is Larra. A shadow is all that is left of him, and no wonder—he has been living for thousands of years. The sun has dried up his flesh and blood and bones and the wind has scattered them like dust. Just see how God can punish a man for his pride!"

"Tell me the story," I said to the old woman, anticipating one of those delightful tales born of the steppe.

And she told me the story.

"Many thousands of years have passed since this occurred. Far across the sea in the land of the rising sun flows a great river, and every leaf and blade of grass in that land casts a shadow large enough to hide a man from the sun, which pours down mercilessly.

"The earth is lavish of its gifts in that country.

"A tribe of powerful people once lived there; they tended their flocks and showed great strength and courage in hunting wild animals. And they feasted when the hunt was over, singing songs and making merry with the maids.

"One day, during such a feast, an eagle dropped out of the sky and carried off a black-haired maiden as lovely as the night. The arrows the men sent after the bird fell back on the ground without injuring it. And so the men set out in search of the maiden, but they could not find her. And in time she was forgotten, as everything on this earth is forgotten."

The old woman drew a deep sigh and fell silent. When she spoke in her cracked voice it was as if she were voicing the sentiments of all the forgotten ages embodied in the shades of remembrance dwelling in her breast. Softly the sea echoed the introduction to this ancient legend which may have had beginning on these very shores.

"But in twenty years she herself came back, worn and wizened, and with her was a youth as strong and handsome as she had been twenty years before. And when she was asked where she had been, she replied that the eagle had carried her off to the mountains and had made her his wife. This was their son. The eagle was no more; on feeling his strength ebbing he had soared high into the sky for the last time, and, folding his wings, had plunged to his death upon the jagged cliffs.

"Everyone gazed in amazement at the son of the eagle, and they saw that he in no way differed from them except that his eyes had the cold proud gleam of the king of birds. When they addressed him, he sometimes did not deign to reply, and when the elders of the tribe approached him, he spoke to them as their equal. This they took as an insult, and they called him an unfeathered arrow with an unsharpened tip, and they told him that thousands like him and thousands twice his age paid them homage and obeyed

their commands. But he looked them boldly in the eye and said that there were no others like himself; let others pay them homage if they wished, but he had no mind to. Oh, then the elders were angry indeed, and in their anger they said:

“There can be no place for him among us. Let him go wherever he wishes.”

“He laughed and went where he wished: he went over to a fair maid who had been watching him intently, and he took her in his arms. And she was the daughter of one of the elders who had reproved him. And although he was very handsome, she thrust him away, for she was afraid of her father. She thrust him away and walked off, and he struck her mightily, and when she fell down he stamped upon her breast until the blood spurted out of her mouth as high as the sky, and the maiden heaved a great sigh and writhed like a snake and died.

“Those who saw this happen were speechless with fear; never before had they seen a woman killed so brutally. And for a long time they stood there in silence, looking at her where she lay with wide-open eyes and blood-stained mouth, and at him who was standing beside her, alone, apart from everyone else, very proud—he even held his head high as if he were calling down punishment upon it. When at last people recovered from their surprise, they seized him and bound him and left him there, finding that to kill him now would be too simple and would give them little satisfaction.”

The night deepened and darkened and became filled with odd little sounds. The marmots peeped mournfully in the steppe, the grasshoppers whirred among the vines, the leaves sighed and whispered to one another, and the disc of the

moon, which had been blood-red, paled as it withdrew from the earth and poured its blue light down on the steppe lavishly

“And then the elders gathered to decide on a punishment worthy of such a crime. At first they thought of having horses tear him to pieces, but this seemed too mild; they thought of having each of them send an arrow into his body, but this, too, was rejected; it was suggested that they burn him alive, but the smoke of the fire would hide his sufferings from them; many suggestions were made, but not one of them satisfied everyone. And all the while his mother knelt silently before him, finding neither words nor tears to move them to pity. For a long time they spoke together, and at last one of their wise men said, after due consideration:

“‘Let us ask him why he has done this.’

“And they asked him.

“‘Unbind me,’ he said. ‘I shall not say a word so long as I am bound.’

“And when they had unbound him he said:

“‘What would you have of me?’—and his tone was that of a master to his slaves.

“‘You have heard,’ said the wise man.

“‘Why should I explain my actions to you?’

“‘That we may understand them. Listen, proud one: it is certain that you are to die; then help us to understand why you have done such a thing. We shall go on living, and it is important that we add to our store of knowledge.’

“‘Very well, I shall tell you, although perhaps I myself do not wholly understand why I did it. It seems to me that I killed her because she repulsed me. And I had need of her.’

“‘But she was not yours,’ they said to him.

“‘And do you make use of only those things

which are yours? I see that each man has nothing but arms and legs and a tongue to speak with. And yet he owns cattle and women and land and many other things.'

"To this they replied that a man must pay for whatever he takes possession of—pay with his mind or his strength or even his life.

"He said that he had no wish to pay.

"When they had spoken to him for some time they saw that he considered himself above everyone else, that indeed he had no thought for anyone but himself. And they were horrified when they realised that he had isolated himself from the whole world. He had neither tribe nor mother nor cattle nor wife; nor did he wish to have any of these things.

"And, seeing this, they again discussed what might be a fitting punishment for him. But they had not spoken long before that same wise man, who until this moment had taken no part in the discussion, said:

"'Wait. A punishment has been found, and a dreadful one it is. In a thousand years you could not think of anything to equal it. His punishment lies in himself. Unbind him and let him go free. That will be his punishment.'

"And then a wonderful thing happened. A bolt of thunder struck out of a cloudless sky. In this way the heavenly powers confirmed the decision of the wise man. Everyone accepted it, and, having done so, they went away. And the youth, who was henceforth named Larra, meaning the despised and rejected—the youth laughed at the people who had rejected him; laughed loudly on finding himself alone and as free as his father had been. But his father had not been a man, whereas he was. Yet he began to live as free as a bird. He stole cattle and maidens and anything

else he wished from the tribesmen. They shot arrows at him, but they could not pierce his body, protected as it was by the invisible armour of the highest punishment. He was adroit, rapacious, strong and cruel, and never did he meet people face to face. They only saw him from a distance. Thus for a long time did he hover alone at the edge of human communities—for a long, long time. And then one day he crept close to a settlement, and when the people rushed out to attack him, he remained where he was and did not try to defend himself. Then one of the men guessed his intention and cried out:

“Do not touch him! He is seeking death!”

“And the people stayed their hands, not wishing to kill him and thereby bring relief to one who had wronged them so. They stayed their hands and laughed at him. And he shuddered at the sound of their laughter, and he clutched at his breast, as if searching for something there. And suddenly he hurled himself at the people, a stone in his hand. But they dodged his blows and did not hit him in return, and when at last, exhausted, he let out a cry of despair and threw himself down on the ground, they withdrew and stood watching him. They saw him struggle to his feet and pick up a knife that had been dropped in the scuffle and strike himself in the breast with it. But the knife broke in two as if it had struck upon stone. And again he threw himself down on the ground and beat his head against it, but the earth, too, withdrew from him, leaving a hollow where his head struck.

“He cannot die!” cried the people in joy.

“And they went away and left him. He lay on his back gazing up into the sky, and he saw the black dots of mighty eagles soaring far, far away. And there was enough misery in his eyes

to sadden the whole world. From that time to this he has been alone, at large, waiting for death. He does nothing but wander over the earth. You yourself have seen how like a shadow he has become, and like a shadow he will remain till the end of time. He understands nothing, neither human speech nor actions; he just goes on and on, for ever in search of something. He cannot be said to live, and yet he is unable to die. And there is no place for him among men. Just see what a man's pride can bring him to!"

The old woman heaved a sigh, and once or twice she gave an odd shake of her head, which had fallen on her breast.

I looked at her. Sleep, it seemed, was overpowering her, and for some reason I felt sorry for her. She had ended her story in an exalted, admonishing tone, and yet I had detected a note of fear and servility in it.

The people down by the sea were singing, and singing in an unusual way. The tune was begun by a contralto, who sang only two or three notes before a second voice took it up from the beginning while the first carried it forward. A third, fourth and fifth voice joined in in the same way, and suddenly this same tune was begun by a chorus of men's voices.

Each of the women's voices was heard separately, and they were like streams of different colours tumbling down over rocks, leaping and sparkling as they rushed to join the rising swell of men's voices, were drowned in it, darted up out of it, drowned it out in their turn, and again, one by one, separated themselves from the heavier stream and soared, clear and strong, into the heights.

The sound of the surf could not be heard for the singing.

II

"Have you ever heard such singing before?" asked Izergil, raising her head to give me a toothless smile.

"No, I have not. Not anywhere."

"And you never will. We love to sing. Only a handsome race can sing well—a handsome race that is filled with love of life. We are such a race. Look, think you those people who are singing are not weary from the day's labour? They laboured from sunrise to sunset, but now that the moon has risen they are singing. People with no interest in life would have gone to bed; but those who find life sweet are singing."

"But their health—" I began.

"One always has enough health to last a lifetime. Health! If you had money, would you not spend it? Health is much like gold. Do you know how my youth was spent? I wove rugs from dawn till dusk, scarcely unbending my back. I, who was as full of life as a ray of sunlight, had to sit as motionless as a stone. Sometimes my very bones ached from sitting so long. But when evening came I ran off to embrace the man I loved. For the three months that my love lasted I ran to him and spent all my nights with him. Yet see to what a great old age I have lived! The blood in my veins was sufficient, it seems. How often I fell in love! How many kisses I gave and took!"

I looked into her face. Her black eyes were still dull; not even her memories could restore their shine. The moon poured light on her dry, cracked lips, on her sharp chin tufted with grey hairs, and on her wrinkled nose that was curved like the beak of an owl. There were dark hollows where her cheeks had been, and in one of them

lay a strand of grey hair that had escaped from under the red rag she had twisted round her head. A web of wrinkles covered her face, neck, and hands, and at every movement she made I expected this parchment-like skin to split and peel off, leaving a bare skeleton with dull black eyes sitting beside me.

Once more she began to talk in her cracked voice:

"I lived with my mother near Falmi, on the banks of the Birlat River, and I was fifteen years old when he came to our farm. He was tall and dark and graceful and very gay. He stopped his boat under our window and called out in a ringing voice: 'Hullo! Can I get some wine and something to eat here?' I looked out of the window, and through the branches of the ash-tree I saw the river all blue in the moonlight, and him standing there in a white blouse tied with a wide sash, one foot in the boat, the other on the bank. And he was rocking the boat and singing, and when he caught sight of me he said: 'Just see what a fair maid lives here, and I knew nothing of it!'-as if he knew all the other fair maids in the world. I gave him some wine and some pork, and four days later I gave myself to him. Every night he and I went boating together. He would come and whistle softly, like a marmot, and I would jump out of the window like a fish on to the river-bank. And off we would go. He was a fisherman from the Prut, and when my mother found out about us and beat me, he urged me to run away to Dobruja with him and even further—to the tributaries of the Danube. But I had grown tired of him by then—he never did anything but sing and make love. I found it boring. And just at that time a band of Gutsuls came roaming through these parts and they found

sweethearts for themselves here. Those maids had a merry time of it! Sometimes one of the lovers would disappear, and his sweetheart would pine away, sure that he had been put in prison or killed in a fight, and then, lo and behold! he would drop out of a clear sky, alone or with two or three comrades, bringing rich gifts (they came by their riches easily). And he would feast with her, and boast of her to his comrades. And this would give her pleasure. Once I asked a girl who had such a lover to introduce me to the Gutsuls. Just a moment, what was that girl's name? I have forgotten. My memory has begun to fail me. But it happened so long ago, anyone would forget. Through this girl I met a young Gutsul. He was handsome. A red-head. Red hair and red whiskers. Flaming red. At times he was moody, at others tender, and again he would roar and fight like a wild beast. Once he struck me in the face. I sprang up on his chest like a cat and sank my teeth into his cheek. From then on he had a dimple in his cheek, and he liked me to kiss him on that dimple."

"But what happened to the fisherman?" I asked.

"The fisherman? He stayed on. He joined their band—the Gutsuls. At first he begged me to come back to him and threatened to throw me into the river if I did not, but he soon got over it. He joined their band and found himself another sweetheart. They were both hanged together—the fisherman and my Gutsul lover. I went to see them hanged. In Dobruja. The fisherman was deathly pale and wept when he went to his death, but the Gutsul smoked his pipe. He walked straight ahead, smoking his pipe, his hands in his pockets, one of his moustaches sweeping his shoulder, the other his chest. When he caught

sight of me, he took the pipe out of his mouth and cried out. 'Farewell!' I wept for him a whole year. They had been caught just when they were ready to go back to their native mountains. They were holding a farewell party at the house of a certain Rumanian when they were captured. Just the two of them. Several others were killed on the spot and the rest escaped. But the Rumanian was made to pay for what he had done. His farm and his mill and his barns of grain were burnt to the ground. He became a beggar."

"Did you do it?" I hazarded a guess.

"The Gutsuls had many friends—I was not the only one. Whoever was their best friend did this in their memory."

The singing on the sea-shore had ceased by this time, and no other sound but the murmur of the waves accompanied the old woman's tale. Their murmur, restless and brooding, was fitting accompaniment to this tale of a restless life. Milder grew the night, deeper the blue of the moon-shine, and softer the indefinable sounds of night's invisible denizens whose clamour was drowned out by the increasing roar of the sea as the wind rose.

"And then there was a Turk I fell in love with. I was one of his harem in Scutari. For a whole week I lived there without minding it, but then I found the life tiresome. Nothing but women everywhere. He had eight of them. All day long they ate and slept and chattered nonsense. Or they quarrelled, and then they were like a set of cackling hens. The Turk was not a young man. His hair was almost white, and he was very rich and important. He spoke like an emperor. His eyes were black and straight—I mean they looked straight into your soul. And he was always praying. I first saw him in Bucharest. He was

strutting about the bazaar like a king, looking very important. I smiled at him. That same evening I was seized in the street and brought to him. He traded in sandal and palm wood and had come to Bucharest to make purchases of some sort.

“Will you go away with me?” he asked.

“I will indeed,” I said.

“Very well,” he said.

“And I went away with him. He was very rich. He had a son, a slim dark-haired youth of sixteen. It was with him I ran away from the Turk—ran away to Bulgaria, to Lom-Palanka. There a Bulgarian woman knifed me in the chest because of her husband or lover, I have forgotten which.

“For a long time after that I lay ill in a nunnery. A Polish girl, a nun, took care of me, and her brother, a monk from a monastery near Artzer-Palanka, used to come to see her. He kept wriggling round me like a worm, and when I got well I went off with him to Poland.”

“But wait: what happened to the Turkish boy?”

“Oh, him? He died. He pined away with homesickness, or perhaps it was love. He began to wilt like a sapling that has too much sun. Just withered away. I remember him lying there blue and transparent as ice, yet consumed by the flames of love. He kept asking me to bend over and kiss him. I loved him dearly and kissed him a lot. Little by little he became so weak he could hardly move. He would just lie there and beg me, as if he were begging alms, to lie down beside him and warm his poor body. And I did. The minute I lay down beside him he would be all aflame. One day I woke up to find him stonecold. He was dead. I wept over him. Who can tell? Perhaps it was I who had killed him. I was twice his

age and very strong and vigorous, but he?—he was just a child.”

She sighed and crossed herself—I had not seen her do that before. Three times she made the sign of the cross, muttering something between her dry lips.

“So you went off to Poland—” I prompted.

“I did, with that little Pole. He was beastly and absurd. When he wanted a woman, he would rub up against me like a tom-cat, the honey oozing between his lips; when his desire was satisfied he would lash me with his tongue as with a knout. One day when we were walking along the bank of a river, he said something proud and insulting. Oh, I was angry! I seethed like boiling pitch. I picked him up like a baby—he was very small—and squeezed him until he went black in the face. Then I swung out and hurled him over the bank into the river. He gave a shout, and it sounded very funny. From the top of the bank I watched him struggling in the water, and then I went away and I have never seen him since. I was lucky in that respect: I never met my lovers after I had left them. It would be bad to meet them—like meeting the dead.”

The old woman grew silent. In my mind’s eye I saw the people her tale had conjured up. I saw her Gutsul lover with the flaming-red hair and moustache calmly smoking his pipe as he went to his death. His eyes, it seemed to me, were a cold blue, and their glance was firm and intense. Beside him walked the dark-whiskered fisherman from the Prut. Loath to die, he was weeping, and his once merry eyes stared dully out of a face that had grown white in the anticipation of death, while his tear-drenched moustaches drooped mournfully at the corners of his twisted mouth. I saw the important old Turk who was no doubt

a fatalist and a despot, and beside him his son, a pale delicate flower of the Orient, poisoned by kisses. And the conceited Pole, polite and cruel, eloquent and cold. And all of them now were but wan shades, and she whom they had kissed so ardently was sitting beside me, still alive but shrivelled with age—bloodless, fleshless, with a heart bereft of all desire and eyes bereft of their shine—almost as much of a shade as they themselves.

She continued:

"I found it hard to live in Poland. The people there are false and cold-blooded. And I could not speak their snake-like tongue that does nothing but hiss. Why do they hiss? God gave them a snake-like tongue because they are so false. And so I set off, I knew not for where, and saw the Poles getting ready to rise up against you Russians. I came to the town of Bochnia. There a certain Jew bought me, not for himself, but to trade with my body. I agreed to this. One has to know how to do something if he is to earn a living: I did not know how to do anything, and I paid for it with my body. But I resolved that if I could get enough money to take me back to my native town on the Birlat, I would break my bonds, however fast they were. I could not complain of my life there. Rich gentlemen came and feasted with me. That cost them big sums. They fought with each other over me and were brought to ruin. One of them tried for a long time to win my heart, and at last this is what he did: he came with his servant, who was carrying a big sack, and he emptied the sack over my head. Gold coins came showering down over me and it cheered my heart to hear their ring as they struck the floor. And yet I turned the man out. He had a fat greasy face and his belly was as puffy as a

pillow. He looked like a stuffed pig. Yes, I turned him out, even though he told me he had sold all his land and his house and his horses to bring me that gold. But by that time I was in love with a worthy gentleman with a scarred face. His face was criss-crossed with scars left by Turkish sabres. He had just come back from helping the Greeks fight the Turks. There was a man for you! What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he went and helped them fight their enemy. The Turks marred him cruelly—under their blows he lost an eye and two fingers of the left hand. What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he fought for them, and he did this because he yearned to do brave deeds, and when a man yearns to do brave deeds, he will always find an opportunity. Life is full of such opportunities, and if a man does not find them, it is because he is lazy or cowardly or does not understand life, for if he understands, he is sure to want to leave some memory of himself behind him. And if everyone wished to do this, life would not gobble people up without leaving a trace of them. A very fine man he was, he with the scarred face. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to do a good deed. I am afraid your people killed him in the uprising. Why did you go to fight the Magyars? But hush, say nothing.”

And admonishing me to hold my tongue, old Izergil herself grew silent and thoughtful.

“I knew a certain Magyar. One day he left me—it was in the depths of winter—and in the spring, when the snow melted, they found him in a field with a bullet through his head. As many people die of love as of the plague—quite as many, if they were to be counted. But what was I talking about? Ah, yes, about Poland. It was there I played my last game. I happened to meet

a gentleman who was very handsome, devilishly handsome. But by that time I was old. Ugh, so old! I must have been forty by then—at least forty. And he was proud and had been pampered by the women. That affair cost me dear. He thought I would be his for the asking, but I did not give myself up so easily. Never had I been the slave of anyone, and by that time I had broken off with the Jew, bought my freedom for a pretty sum. I was living in Cracow in fine style, with horses and gold and servants and everything else I wanted. He came to see me, the proud demon, and expected me to throw myself into his arms. A pitched battle was fought between us I grew haggard under the strain, for it lasted a long time, but at last I won. He crawled on his knees before me. But no sooner had he got me than he cast me off. Then I knew I had grown old, and a bitter realisation it was. Very bitter. I loved him, the fiend, and he would laugh in my face when he met me. He was a beast. And he would speak mockingly of me to others, and I knew it. Oh, how I suffered! But there he was, in the same town, and I doted on him in spite of everything. And then one day he went away to fight the Russians. I could not bear it. I tried to take myself in hand, but I could not master my feelings. I decided to go to him. He was stationed in a wood near Warsaw.

“But when I got there I found out that your soldiers had beaten them and he had been taken prisoner and was being held in a village not far away.

“‘In other words, I shall never see him again!’ I thought to myself. And I wanted desperately to see him. So I thought of a way to do so. I dressed myself as a beggar-woman, pretended to be lame, covered my face, and set out for the village

where he was imprisoned. I found it full of soldiers and Cossacks; it cost me dear to stay there. When I found out where the Poles were, I realised it would be very hard to reach them. But reach them I must. And so one night I set out. As I was crawling between the beds of a vegetable garden I saw a sentry standing in front of me. I could hear the Poles singing and talking in loud voices. They were singing a song to the Virgin, and my Arkadek was singing with them. And I remembered with bitterness that once men had crawled after me, and now here was I crawling like a worm after a man, perhaps crawling to my death. The sentry had pricked up his ears and was leaning forward. What was I to do? I stood up and went towards him. I did not have a knife or any other weapon with me—nothing but my hands and my tongue. I was sorry I had not taken a knife with me. The sentry levelled his bayonet at my throat, and I whispered: 'Wait! Listen to what I have to say and spare my life if you have a heart in your breast. I have nothing to offer you, but I beg your mercy.' He lowered his gun and whispered: 'Go away, old woman. Go away. What brings you here?' And I said that my son was imprisoned there. 'My son, soldier; does that mean nothing to you? You, too, are somebody's son. Then look at me and understand that I have a son like you, and that he is imprisoned here. Let me have one look at him. Perhaps he must die soon, and perhaps you, too, will be killed on the morrow. Will your mother not shed tears over you? And will it not be hard for you to die without a last look at her, your mother? It will be just as hard for any son. Take pity on yourself, and on him, and on me, his mother!'

"How long I stood there trying to persuade

him! The rain poured down, drenching us. The wind blew and wailed, buffeting me now in the back, now in the chest. And I stood swaying in front of that stony-hearted soldier. He kept saying 'no,' and every time I heard that unfeeling word, the desire to see Arkadek flared up hotter within me. As I talked I measured him with my eye—he was small and thin and had a cough. At last I threw myself on the ground in front of him, and, still pleading with him, I seized him round the knees and threw him on the ground. He fell in the mud. Quickly I turned him face down and pressed his head into a puddle to keep him from crying out. He did not cry out, but he struggled to throw me off his back. I took his head in both hands and pushed it deeper into the puddle. He was suffocated. Then I rushed over to the barn where the Poles were singing. 'Arkadek!' I whispered through a chink in the wall. They are sly fellows, those Poles, and so they did not stop singing on hearing me. But suddenly I saw his eyes opposite mine. 'Can you get out of here?' I asked. 'Yes, under the wall,' he said. 'Then come quickly.' And so four of them crawled out of the barn, my Arkadek among them. 'Where is the sentry?' asked Arkadek. 'There he lies.' Then they crept away as quietly as possible, bent almost double. The rain kept coming down and the wind wailed loudly. We reached the end of the village and walked on through the woods for a long time without saying a word. We walked quickly. Arkadek held my hand in his, and his hand was hot and trembling. Oh, how good it was to walk there beside him as long as he kept silent! They were my last moments—the last happy moments of an insatiable life! But at last we came to a meadow, and there we stopped. All four of them thanked me for what

I had done. They talked on and on—I thought they would never stop—and as I listened to them I kept feasting my eyes on Arkadek. How would he treat me now? And he put his arms about me and said something in a very pompous tone, I do not remember just what he said, but it was something to the effect that he would love me for having set him free, and he knelt before me and said with a smile: 'My queen!' Ugh, what a false dog he was! I gave him a kick and would have slapped him in the face, but he leapt to his feet and sprang aside. And he stood before me, very grim and white. And the other three stood there looking sullen and saying not a word. I stared back at them. And I remember that a great weariness and indifference came over me. And I said to them: 'Go your way.' And they said to me, the dogs: 'And will you go back and tell them in what direction we have gone?' That is what beasts they were. But they went away. And I, too, went away. And on the next day your soldiers caught me, but they did not keep me long. Then I realised it was time for me to make a home for myself—the life of a cuckoo was a thing of the past. My body had grown heavy, my wings feeble, by feathers dull. I was old, I was old. And so I went to Galicia, and from there to Dobruja. For the last thirty years I have been living here. I had a husband, a Moldavian, but he died about a year ago. And I go on living. All alone. No, not alone—with them—" and the old woman pointed to the sea. They were quiet now. Now and again there would be a faint suggestion of sound that died away as soon as it was born.

"They love me. I tell them many tales, and they like them. They are so young. I feel happy with them. I gaze at them and think: 'Time was when I was as they are. But in my day people

had more strength and fire, and that made life gayer and more worth while. It did indeed."

She relapsed into silence again. I felt sad, sitting there beside her. Soon she dozed off, nodding her head and muttering something, perhaps a prayer, under her breath.

A dark cloud with the jagged outlines of a mountain range rose out of the sea and moved towards the steppe. Wisps were torn off its highest tip and went flying ahead, putting out the stars one by one. The sea murmured. A sound of kissing, of whispering, and of sighing came from the vine-yard not far away. A dog howled out in the steppe. The air was filled with a strange odour that pricked the nostrils and made one's nerves tingle. The clouds cast dark clusters of shadow which crept over the earth, now fading, now growing sharply distinct. Nothing remained of the moon but a vague opalescent glow that at times was completely blotted out by a bit of cloud. Tiny blue lights flickered far out in the steppe, which now had become dark and lowering, as if something fearful were lurking there. The lights flared up as if people were wandering over the steppe in search of something, lighting matches which the wind instantly blew out. They were very strange, these blue lights, and suggested the fantastic.

"Do you see any sparks out there?" asked Izergil.

"Those little blue lights?" said I, pointing out to the steppe.

"Blue? Yes, those little lights. So they are still to be seen! But not by my eyes. There are many things I do not see any more."

"Where do they come from?" I asked the old woman.

I had already heard one explanation of them,

but I wanted to hear what old Izergil would say.

"They come from the flaming heart of Danko. Once upon a time there was a heart that broke into flame. And those sparks are what is left of it. I shall tell you that tale. It, too, is old. Everything is old. See how many fine things there were in olden times! Today there is nothing—no men, no deeds, no tales—that can be compared with those of olden times. Why is that so? Come, tell me. Ah, you cannot. What do you know? What do any of you young people know? If you searched the past you would find the answer to all life's riddles. But you do not, and so you know nothing. Think you I do not see what is happening? I see only too well, even if my eyes have grown weak. And I see that instead of living, people spend their whole lives getting ready to live. And when they have robbed themselves by wasting all that time, they blame it on fate. What has fate to do with it? Each man is his own fate. There are all sorts of people in the world today, but I see no strong ones among them. What has become of them? And the handsome ones are growing fewer and fewer."

The old woman stopped to reflect on what had become of the strong and the handsome, and as she mused she gazed out into the dark steppe, as if searching for the answer there.

I waited in silence until she should begin her tale, fearing that any comment would distract her.

And presently she began.

III

"Long, long ago there lived a tribe of people in a place that was bounded on three sides by impenetrable forests and on the fourth by the

steppe. They were a strong, brave, and cheerful people, but evil times came upon them. Other tribes came warring against them and drove them into the depths of the forest. The forest was dark and swampy, for it was very ancient, and the boughs of the trees were so closely interwoven that they shut out the view of the sky, and the sun's rays had all they could do to pierce the thick foliage and reach the waters of the swamp. And wherever they reached those waters, poisonous vapours arose, and the people began to take sick and die. Then the women and children of that tribe began to weep, and the men brooded on what had happened and grew despondent. There was nothing for it but to get out of the forest, but there were only two ways of getting out: one of them was to go back over the road they had come, but at the end of this road strong and vicious foes awaited them; the other was to push forward through the forest, but here they would come up against the giant trees whose mighty branches were closely entwined and whose gnarled roots were sunk deep into the mire of the bogs. These stone-like trees stood silent and motionless in the grey gloom of daylight, and they seemed to close in upon the people at nightfall when the fires were lit. And always, day and night, this tribe, born to the freedom of the steppe, was walled in by shadows that seemed waiting to crush them. Most fearful of all was the wind that went wailing through the tops of the trees, causing the whole forest to sing a grim dirge to the people imprisoned there. They were, as I have said, a brave people, and they would have fought to the death with those who had once defeated them, had they not feared being wiped out in the fight: they had their forefathers' behests to defend, and if they perished, their behests would perish with

them. And for that reason they sat pondering their fate through the long nights, with the poisonous vapours rising all around them and the forest singing its mournful song. And as they sat there, the shadows of the fires leaped about them in a soundless dance, and it seemed as if it were not mere shadows that were dancing, but the evil spirits of forest and bog celebrating their triumph. There the men sat brooding, and nothing, not even work or women, can exhaust a man as do despondent thoughts. They grew weak from brooding. Fear was born in their hearts, binding their strong arms; terror gripped them as they listened to the women wailing over the bodies of those who had died of the poisonous vapours, or lamenting over the fate of the living made helpless by fear. And cowardly words came to be spoken in the forest—at first softly and timidly, but louder and louder as time went on. And at last the people thought of going to the enemy and making him a gift of their freedom. So frightened were they by the thought of death that not one of them shrank from living the life of a slave. But at this moment Danko appeared and saved them from such a fate."

The old woman, it seems, had often recounted this tale about the flaming heart of Danko. As she intoned it in her hoarse crackling voice, I seemed to hear the sounds of the forest, in whose depths these unfortunate exiles were poisoned to death.

"Danko was one of them, and he was young and handsome. Handsome people are always courageous. And he said to his comrades:

"'Stones are not to be removed by thinking. He who does naught will come to naught. Why should we exhaust our energies thinking and brooding? Arise, and let us go through the forest

until we come out at the other end; after all, it must have an end—everything has an end. Come, let us set forth!"

"They looked at him and saw that he was the best man among them, for his eyes were aglow with life and strength.

"Lead us," they said.

"And he led them."

The old woman stopped talking and gazed out over the steppe, which was growing darker and darker. Sparks from the flaming heart of Danko flared up in the distance like ethereal blue flowers that bloomed but for a moment.

"And so he led them, Danko. And they followed him willingly, for they believed in him. It was a difficult trek. It was dark, and at every step the yawning bogs swallowed people up, and the trees were like a mighty wall barring the way. Their branches were closely interwoven, their roots were like snakes reaching out in every direction, and every step these people took cost them blood and sweat. For a long time they went on, and the further they went, the thicker grew the forest and the weaker grew their limbs. And then they began to murmur against Danko, saying that he was young and inexperienced and had no right to bring them here. But he kept walking at their head, his spirit undaunted, his mind unclouded.

"But one day a storm broke over the forest, and the trees whispered together menacingly. And instantly it became as dark as if here were gathered all the nights that had passed since the forest was born. And the little people walked on under the big trees amid the roar of the storm, and as they walked the giant trees creaked and sang a sinister song, and the lightning flashed above the tree-tops, throwing a cold blue light

over the forest for a brief instant, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared and striking terror into the hearts of the people. And in the cold flashes of the lightning the trees seemed to be live things that were stretching out long gnarled arms and weaving them into a net to catch these people who were trying to escape from darkness. And something cold and dark and fearsome peered at them through the dark foliage. It was a difficult trek, and the people who had set out on it grew exhausted and lost heart. But they were ashamed to admit their weakness, and so they poured out their anger and resentment on Danko, who was walking at their head. They began to accuse him of being incapable of leading them.

"They came to a halt, and, tired and angry, they began to upbraid him there in the quivering darkness, amid the triumphant roar of the storm.

"'You are a despicable and evil creature who had brought us to grief,' they said. 'You have exhausted us by leading us here, and for that you shall die.'

"'You said: "Lead us!" and I led you,' cried out Danko, turning to face them. 'I have the courage to lead you, and that is why I undertook to do it. But you? What have you done to help yourselves? You have done nothing but follow me, without husbanding your strength for a longer march. You merely followed me like a flock of sheep.'

"His words only infuriated them the more.

"'You shall die! You shall die!' they shrieked

"The forest roared and echoed their cries, and the lightning tore the darkness to shreds. Danko gazed upon those for whose sake he had undertaken such great labour, and he saw that they were like wild beasts. Many people were pressing

about him, but he could detect no signs of humanity in their faces and he knew that he could expect no mercy from them. Then resentment seethed in his breast, but it was quelled by compassion. He loved these people, and he feared that without him they would perish. And the flames of a great yearning to save them and lead them out on to an easy path leaped up in his heart, and these mighty flames were reflected in his eyes. And seeing this, the people thought he was enraged; they thought that was why his eyes flashed so. And they instantly grew wary, like wolves, expecting him to throw himself against them, and they drew closer about him that they might seize him and kill him. He saw what they were thinking, but the flames in his heart only flared up the brighter, for their thoughts added the oil of sorrow to the flames of his yearning.

“And the forest went on singing its mournful song, and the thunder crashed, and the rain poured down.

“What else can I do to save these people?” cried out Danko above the thunder.

“And suddenly he ripped open his breast and tore out his heart and held it high above his head.

“It shone like the sun, even brighter than the sun, and the raging forest was subdued and lighted up by this torch, the torch of a great love for the people, and the darkness retreated before it and plunged, quivering, into a yawning bog in the depths of the forest. And in their astonishment the people were as if turned to stone.

“Follow me!” cried Danko, and he rushed forward, holding his flaming heart high above his head to light the way.

“And the people followed him as if under a spell. And once more the forest began to murmur and wave its tree-tops in wonder. But its murmur

was drowned out by the sound of running feet. The people were running ahead boldly and swiftly, lured on by the wonderful vision of the flaming heart. And even now there were those who perished, but they perished without tears and complaints. And Danko went on ahead of them, his heart flaming brighter and brighter.

“And suddenly the forest in front of them parted; it parted to make way for them and then closed behind them, a mute and solid wall, and Danko and his followers plunged into a sea of sunlight and rain-washed air. The storm was now behind them over the forest, while here the sun shone, the steppe throbbed with life, the grass was hung with diamond rain-drops and the river was streaked with gold. It was evening, and the rays of the sunset painted the river as red as the blood which poured in a hot stream from the wound in Danko’s breast.

“The brave Danko cast his eye over the endless steppe, cast a joyful eye over this land of freedom, and gave a proud laugh. And then he fell down and died.

“And his followers were so full of joy and hope that they did not notice he had died and that his brave heart was still flaming beside his dead body. But one timid creature noticed it and, fearing he knew not what, stamped on the flaming heart. And it sent up a shower of sparks and went out.

“And that is why blue sparks are always to be seen in the steppe before a thunder-storm.”

As the old woman finished her beautiful tale, the steppe grew incredibly still, as if overawed by the strength of the brave Danko, who set fire to his own heart for the sake of his fellow-men and died without seeking the least reward for what he had done.

The old woman dozed off. And as I looked at her I wondered how many more tales and memories her mind contained. And I thought about the flaming heart of Danko and about the power of the human imagination, which has created so many beautiful and inspiring legends.

The wind blew the rags off the bony chest of old Izergil, who had fallen fast asleep by this time. I covered up her old body and lay down on the ground beside her. It was dark and still in the steppe. Clouds floated slowly, wearily, across the sky, and the sea murmured softly, mournfully....

1894

GRANDFATHER ARKHIP AND LYONKA

Waiting for the ferry they both lay down in the shade of the steep bank and stared long and silently at the swift, muddy waves of the Kuban washing past their feet. Lyonka dozed off but grandfather Arkhip, aware of a dull, constricting pain in his chest, could not fall asleep. Against the dark brown background of the earth, their tattered bent figures showed only as two pathetic heaps, one—slightly larger, the other—slightly smaller; their weary, sunburnt and dusty faces were of precisely the same colour as their brownish rags.

Grandfather Arkhip's long, bony figure was stretched out across a narrow strip of sand which extended like a yellow ribbon the whole length of the shore between the steep bank and the river; the dozing Lyonka was lying curled up at the old man's side. Lyonka was small and frail. In his rags he resembled a gnarled twig broken away from his grandfather—an ancient, sapless tree, washed up onto the sand by the waves of the river.

The old man, raising himself on one elbow, looked across at the opposite shore, sun-drenched and sparsely adorned by occasional scrubby withies; from amongst these bushes jutted the black deck of the ferry.

It was a dull, desolate prospect. The grey strip of road led away from the river into the depths of the steppe; it seemed somehow relentlessly straight, dry and depressing.

His eyes, the dull, inflamed eyes of an old man, the lids red and swollen, blinked anxiously, and the face with its network of wrinkles was set in an expression of weary misery. Every now and again he would give a controlled cough and, glancing down at his grandson, cover his mouth with his hand. The cough was hoarse, constricted, forcing the old man to rise from the ground and squeezing great tear-drops from his eyes.

This cough and the quiet whispering of the waves on the sand were the only sounds in all the steppe.... It spread out on either side of the river, vast, brown, burnt by the sun, and only way off in the distance, almost beyond the old man's range of vision, a golden sea of wheat tossed and rippled opulently and the blinding, brilliant sky fell straight down into it. Against it were silhouetted the three slender forms of distant poplars; it seemed as though they were growing now bigger, now smaller while the sky and the wheat which it covered rose and fell, shimmering. And then suddenly all was hidden behind the gleaming, silver veil of the steppe heat-haze....

This veil, streaming, brilliant and elusive, sometimes came flowing from far away to the very bank of the river.... and then it would seem like another river, suddenly pouring from the sky, as pure and calm as the sky itself.

At such times Grandfather Arkhip, unaccustomed to such phenomena, would rub his eyes and think sadly to himself that the heat and the steppe between them were robbing him of his sight as they had already robbed him of the last remnants of strength in his legs.

Today he was feeling even worse than he usually had over the last months. He felt that he would soon die and, although his own attitude

to this was one of complete apathy as to an unavoidable necessity not worth thinking about, he would nevertheless have preferred to die far away from here in his native village, and he was very worried about his grandson. What would happen to Lyonka?

He faced himself with this question several times a day and always something in him contracted, went cold, and he felt so miserable that he wanted to set off back home, to Russia* without further delay....

But it was a long way to go to Russia. He would not get there now, anyway, he would die on the way. Here, in the Kuban, folks were generous with their alms; the people as a whole were well-off, though dour and of an unkind humour. They had no love for beggars because they themselves were rich.

His rheumy gaze alighting on his grandson, the old man gently stroked the boy's head with his rough hand.

Lyonka stirred and raised his blue eyes to look at him, great, deep eyes, full of an unchildish thoughtfulness and seeming even wider in the thin, pockmarked little face with the narrow, bloodless lips and sharp nose.

"Is it coming?" he asked and, shielding his eyes with his hand, looked towards the river where it sparkled in the rays of the sun.

"Not yet, it's not coming. It's standing still. What is there to bring it over here? There's no one calling it, so it stands there..." Arkhip spoke slowly, continuing to stroke the boy's head. "Were you asleep?"

Lyonka shook his head uncertainly and

* By Russia Arkhip means the Central Provinces.—*Ed.*

stretched himself out on the sand. Both were silent for a while.

"If I could swim I'd have a bathe," announced Lyonka staring fixedly at the river.

"The river's such a swift one! We haven't any rivers like that. What's it all about? It runs as though it were afraid of being late...."

And Lyonka turned disapprovingly away from the water.

"I've got it," said his grandfather after a short pause for thought. "Let's take our belts off and tie them, I'll tie one end round your ankle and you can have your swim...."

"Well now!" Lyonka drawled with reasonable scepticism. "What'll you think of next! Think it wouldn't pull you in too? We'd both drown!"

"You're right there! It would. Eh, but it does race ... Just think, when it floods in spring—what a sight!... And the water meadows—how they get through the mowing! There must be no end to 'em!"

Lyonka was not feeling like talking and he left his grandfather's words unanswered, picking up a piece of dry clay and reducing it to dust with his fingers, his face serious and concentrated.

His grandfather looked at him and thought his own thoughts, puckering his eyes.

"There, you see," Lyonka began again in a quiet, monotonous voice, brushing the dust from his hands. "This earth, now ... I took it, and crumbled it up and it turned into dust ... nothing but tiny, tiny pieces, so small you can hardly see them...."

"Well, and what of that?" asked Arkhip and began to cough, peering through the tears brimming from his eyes at the great, drily sparkling

eyes of his grandson "What are you getting at?" he added, having had his cough.

"Nothing in particular," Lyonka shook his head. "S'pose I meant that all that out here..." he waved his hand in the direction of the river. "And it's all been built over.... You and I've been through so many towns! Awful many! And there's such masses of people everywhere!"

And, unable to nail down his thought, Lyonka elapsed into a meditative silence, staring about him.

The old man was silent too for a while and then, shifting over to sit hard up against his grandson, said gently:

"There's a clever lad! It's right what you were saying—it's all dust... The towns, and the people, and you and I—nothing but dust. Eh, Lyonka, Lyonka! ... If only you could learn to read and write! ... you'd go a long way. But what'll become of you as things are?"

The grandfather drew his grandson's head to him and kissed him.

"Wait..." Lyonka exclaimed with a little more animation freeing his flaxen locks from his grandfather's gnarled and trembling fingers. "What was that you said? Dust? The towns and everything?"

"That's the way God made things, laddie. All is of the earth, and the earth itself is dust. And everything on the earth must die.... That's how things are! And that is why man should eat bread in the sweat of his brow and in humility. I shall die soon, too," the grandfather changed the subject abruptly and added miserably, "And where'll you go then, when you don't have me any more, eh?"

Lyonka had often had to listen to this question from his grandfather. He was tired of talking

about death and he turned away without answering, plucked a blade of grass, put it in his mouth and began to chew slowly.

His grandfather, however, could not leave the subject alone.

"Why don't you answer? What'll you do when I'm gone, I say?" he asked quietly, bending towards the boy and coughing again.

"I've told you already..." Lyonka pronounced absent-mindedly and with some irritation, glancing up at his grandfather out of the corner of his eye.

Another reason he disliked these conversations was that they often ended in a quarrel. His grandfather would expound at length on the proximity of his death. At first, Lyonka had listened attentively, had felt frightened at the threatened change in his circumstances, and had cried but then he had grown weary of listening—his attention wandered, he began to follow his own line of thought and his grandfather, when he noticed this, would grow angry and complain that Lyonka did not love him, did not appreciate his care, and would end by reproaching Lyonka with wishing to be rid of him, his grandfather, just as soon as possible.

"What do you mean—you've told me? You're a foolish little lad, not fit to find your own way in life. How old are you? Rising eleven, no more. And a weakling, at that, not fit for hard work. Where'll you go? Do you think you'll find kind people to help you? If you had money they'd help you to run through it soon enough—that's for certain. But to go about asking for alms is a bitter lot—even for me, an old man. Bow your head to everyone, beg from everybody. And they curse you, strike you sometimes, send you packing.... Do you think anyone thinks of a beggar

as a real person? No one! It's ten years now since I've been on the roads. I know. They value a piece of bread at a thousand rubles. A man'll give you a piece of bread and you can see how he's thinking the gates of heaven are swinging open for him as he does it. Do you think there's any other reason people have for giving? As a sop to their own consciences, my friend; that's their reason, not because they're sorry for you! They push a piece your way so's the food shouldn't stick in their own gullets. A full man is a beast. And he has no compassion with the man who is hungry. They are enemies—the full man and the hungry, and there'll be motes in each other's eyes for ever and ever. Because it's not possible for them to understand or pity one another...."

The old man grew more and more animated in his bitterness and his misery. They made his lips tremble, his dull old eyes blink rapidly in the red frames of their lids and lashes, and the wrinkles on his dark face stand out more clearly defined.

Lyonka did not like him in this mood and felt vaguely frightened.

"So I'm asking you: what are you going to do with the world? You're a poor, sick lad, and the world's a beast. And it'll swallow you up at one gulp. And that's what I don't want to happen.... I love you, laddie, that's why! You're all I've got and I'm all you've got.... How'm I going to die, eh? I can't die and leave you... with whom? Oh Lord! How has thy servant offended thee?! To live is beyond my strength, and I must not die, because I have to look after the child! Seven years now... I've nursed ... in my old ... arms.... Oh Lord, help me!"

The old man sat up and burst into tears, hiding his head in his poor, weak knees.

The river went hurrying on into the distance, splashing loudly up against the banks as though it wished to drown out the sound of the old man's sobbing. The cloudless sky smiled a brilliant smile, pouring down a burning heat, harkening calmly to the rebellious clamour of the turgid waters.

"There, there, granddad, don't cry", Lyonka spoke sternly, averting his eyes, and then, turning to face the old man, added, "We've been through it all before. I'll be all right. I'll take a job in some tavern or other...."

"They'll beat you to death..." groaned his grandfather through his tears.

"And maybe they won't. May be they won't, at that!" Lyonka's voice was reckless, almost challenging. "And so what? I'm not a lamb for anybody's fleecing!"

At this point, Lyonka broke off suddenly for some reason and, after a brief silence, added quietly:

"And I can always go into a monastery."

"If you'd go into a monastery, now!" sighed his grandfather, coming to life, and again began to writhe in a fit of breathless coughing.

Above their heads sounded the scrape of wheels....

"Fe-erry! Fe-erry—hey!" The very air was split by the stentorian voice.

They jumped to their feet, picking up their staves and knapsacks.

With a piercing scraping sound a cart drove out onto the sand. Standing up in it was a Cossack. Throwing back his head in its shaggy cap well down over one ear, he was preparing to let out another yell, drawing the air through his open mouth which made his wide, protruding chest protrude even further. His white teeth flashed brilliantly in the silken frame of his beard

which began growing just under the blood-shot eyes. Beneath his open shirt and the *chokha** thrown carelessly over his shoulders could be glimpsed a hirsute, sunburnt torso. His whole figure, large and stolid, together with his well-fleshed, also monstrously large, skewbald horse and the fat tyres on the high wheels of his cart—exuded prosperity, strength and health.

“Hey!... Hey!”

Grandfather and grandson pulled off their caps and bowed low.

“Good day!” grunted the newcomer abruptly and, having cast a glance at the far bank where the black ferry was emerging slowly and awkwardly from the bushes, transferred his full attention to the beggars. “From Russia, are you?”

“From Russia, kind sir!” answered Arkhip with a bow.

“Short of vitals there, eh?”

He leapt down to the ground from his cart and began to tighten some parts of the harness.

“Even the cockroaches are dying of hunger.”

“Ho-ho! The cockroaches dying? If there’s not a crumb left for them, must mean you lick the platter clean. You’re good eaters. But you must be bad workers. When you begin to work properly that’ll be an end to your famines.”

“It’s the earth, good sir, that’s at the bottom of it. It’s no longer fertile. We’ve sucked it dry.”

“The earth?” The Cossack shook his head. “The earth should always be fertile, to that end was it given to man. Say: hands, not earth. The hands are to blame. In good hands even a stone will yield a crop.”

The ferry arrived.

* *Chokha*—a top garment with wide, fly-away sleeves.
—Ed.

Two tough, red-faced Cossacks, their thick legs braced against the deck of the ferry, pulled it noisily up onto the bank, swayed at the impact, dropped the rope and looked across at one another, panting and puffing.

"Hot?" The newcomer grinned, touching his cap as he led his horse onto the ferry.

"Uhu!" answered one of the ferry men, pushing his hands deep into the pockets of his *sharovari*,* and, walking up to the cart, glanced into it and twitched his nose, sniffing gustily.

The other man sat down on the floor and, groaning, began to take off one of his boots.

Lyonka and his grandfather boarded the ferry and leant up against the side, keeping an eye on the Cossacks.

"Well, let's go!" commanded the owner of the cart.

"Haven't you got anything to drink with you?" asked the one who had inspected the cart. His comrade had taken off his boot and was examining it with narrowed eyes.

"Nothing. Why? Is the Kuban running dry of water?"

"Water! . . . I didn't mean water."

"You meant spirits? Don't carry the stuff."

"How come you don't carry it?" his interlocuter wondered aloud, his eyes boring into the floor of the ferry.

"Come on, now. Let's go!"

The Cossack spat on his hands and took hold of the rope. The passenger began to help him.

"Hey, granddad, why don't you lend a hand?" the ferryman who was still busy with his shoe turned to Arkhip.

* *Sharovari*—wide trousers gathered at the ankles.
—Ed.

"It's beyond my strength, brother!" the old man answered in a sing-song whine.

"And they don't need any help. They'll manage by themselves!"

As though to convince Arkhip of the truth of his words, the man went heavily down on one knee and then lay down on the deck of the ferry.

His comrade cursed him lazily and, receiving no answer, stamped his feet loudly, bracing himself on the deck.

Under constant pressure from the current, accompanied by the muffled sound of the waves lapping against its sides, the ferry rocked and shuddered, waging its way slowly forward.

Looking at the water, Lyonka felt that his head was spinning sweetly and his eyes, wearied by the rapid course of the waves, were closing sleepily. The muttering of his grandfather which seemed to be coming from a long way away, the creaking of the rope and the sucking splash of the waves were sending him to sleep, he was about to sink down onto the deck in a drowsy lethargy when suddenly something gave him such a jolt that he fell over.

Opening his eyes wide he looked about him. The Cossacks were laughing at him as they moored the ferry to a charred stump on the bank.

"Went off to sleep, eh? Poor little runt! Get in the cart. I'll take you as far as the village. You hop in too, granddad."

Thanking the Cossack in a deliberately snuffling voice the old man clambered groaning into the cart. Lyonka jumped up beside him and they set off in a cloud of fine black dust which set the old man coughing so hard that he had to struggle for breath.

The Cossack began to sing. His song consisted of strange sounds, notes which broke off in the

middle and ended in a whistle. It was as though he were unravelling sounds like threads from a tangled ball and snapping them off short whenever he came to a knot.

The wheels creaked protestingly, the dust whirled up from under them, the old man, his head shaking, coughed continually, and Lyonka thought of how they would soon come to the village and would have to sing "Lord Jesus Christ" in nasal tones beneath the windows.... Once again the village boys would bathe him and the women bore him with their everlasting questions about Russia.... At such times it was agony to him to see his grandfather, coughing more often and stooping so low it was painful and awkward for him, putting on a whining voice and telling tales of things that could never have happened anywhere, punctuated by sniffs and sobs.... He would tell how in Russia people were dying in the streets and were left lying there where they had fallen because there was no one to bury them, all the people were so stunned and apathetic from hunger.... Lyonka and his granddad had never seen anything of the kind anywhere. But it was all necessary to obtain more alms. Yet what could one do with charitable offerings in this part of the world? At home you could always sell any left-overs for forty kopeks or even half a ruble a pood,* but here you would never find a buyer. Afterwards there was often nothing left for it but to empty their packs of the frequently delicious morsels of food which folk had given them somewhere out on the steppe.

"Going on collection?" enquired the Cossack, glancing over his shoulder at the two bent figures.

* Pood—36 lbs.—*Ed.*

"Of course, worthy sir!" Arkhip answered him with a sigh.

"Stand up, granddad, I'll show you where I live. You can come and spend the night at my place."

The old man tried to get to his feet but fell and, striking his side against the edge of the cart, let out a suppressed groan.

"Eh, you *are* old, aren't you?" rumbled the Cossack sympathetically. "Well, never mind, you needn't look; when the time comes you need somewhere to spend the night, you ask for Chorny, Andrei Chorny, that's me. And now get down. Good-bye!"

Grandfather and grandson found themselves in front of a stand of silver and black poplars. Between their trunks there was a glimpse of roofs and fences, and everywhere they looked, to right and to left, towered similar stands of trees. Their green foliage was covered in grey dust and the bark of the thick, stubborn trunks was all cracked with heat.

Directly before the beggars a narrow lane passed between two lines of wattle fencing and they set off along it with the shambling stride of people who spend much of their time walking.

"Well, how shall we take it, together or separately?" asked the old man and, not waiting for an answer, added: "Together would be better—you get next to nothing on your own. You don't know how to beg...."

"And what do we need all that much for? We won't be able to get through it anyway..." answered Lyonka frowning, staring about him.

"What do we need it for? You're not a grain of sense, lad!... What if we should come across someone and really hook him? He'd give money.

And money is worth having; with money in your pocket and a bit of luck you'll come to no harm when I'm dead."

And, smiling tenderly, the grandfather ran his hand through his grandson's hair.

"Do you know how much I've put aside since we've been on the road? Eh?"

"How much?" asked Lyonka indifferently

"Eleven and a half rubles!... There!"

But Lyonka was impressed neither by the sum of money nor by his grandfather's tone of rapturous pride.

"Eh, you baby, you baby!" sighed the old man.
"So we'll take it separately, shall we?"

"Separately...."

"Well.... All right, then, you go on to the church."

"Okay."

Arkhip turned into the lane leading off to the left and Lyonka went straight on. He had not gone more than ten steps when he heard a quavering voice: "Kind folk and providers!" The exhortation sounded as though someone had drawn the palm of his hand from the base to the highest treble of an untuned harp. Lyonka shuddered and went on more quickly. Whenever he heard his grandfather begging he felt ill-at-ease and somehow miserable and, when the old man met with a refusal, he was even frightened that his grandfather would burst into tears.

The quavering, pathetic notes of his grandfather's voice were still sounding in his ears, hovering in the drowsy, oppressive air above the village. Lyonka went to the wattle fence and sat down in the shadow of the overhanging branches of a cherry-tree. From somewhere nearby sounded the resonant buzzing of a bee....

Casting off his pack, Lyonka laid his head

upon it and, after gazing for a short time at the sky through the leaves above his head, went sound asleep, sheltered from the eyes of passers-by by the thick tall weeds and the checkered shadow of the wattle fence.

He was awakened by strange sounds vibrating in an air which had already grown fresher from the proximity of evening. Someone not far away from him was weeping. The weeping was that of a child—wholehearted and uncontrolled. The sound of the sobs began to fade on a high, minor key, then suddenly burst out again with renewed intensity and continued to pour forth as it came closer. He raised his head and peered out at the lane through the grass.

Along it was walking a girl of about seven, cleanly dressed, her face, which every now and again she would attempt to dry with the hem of her white skirt, all red and swollen from weeping. She walked slowly, dragging her bare feet along the road, kicking up the thick dust and obviously unaware of where she was going—or why. She had big, black eyes, just now—hurt, sad and full of tears. small, fine, pink ears peeped mischievously from under locks of chestnut hair which, all untidy, were falling over her forehead, her cheeks, her shoulders.

She seemed very comical to Lyonka, in spite of her tears . . . comical and merry. . . . A real imp, by the look of her.

“What are you crying for?” he asked, scrambling to his feet as she came level with him.

She started and stopped short, ceasing to cry at once but still sniffing surreptitiously. Then, when she had looked him over for a few seconds, her lips began to tremble again, her face wrinkled, her chest heaved and, bursting into tears again, she went on her way.

Lyonka felt his heart contracting and suddenly set out after her.

"Don't cry. You're a big girl—you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" he began before he had caught her up and then, when he came up level with her, looked into her face and asked again, "Well now, what's making you blub like that?"

"O-oh!" she moaned. "It's all very well for you. . ." and suddenly dropped down in the dust of the road, covering her face with her hands and keening despairingly.

"Well!" Lyonka made a scornful gesture, rejecting all further responsibility. "Women! There's women for you! Shame!"

But that was of no help to either of them. Lyonka, watching the tears trickle out one by one from between her slender pink fingers, felt sad and wanted to cry too. He bent down over her and, carefully raising his hand, gently touched her hair but plucked it back at once as though afraid of his own boldness. She continued to cry and said nothing.

"Listen!" began Lyonka after a moment's silence, feeling a very real desire to help her. "What's the matter with you? Someone been knocking you about, have they? You'll soon get over it! Or maybe it's something else? Tell me! Eh?"

The girl, not taking her hands from her face, shook her head sadly and finally answered him slowly through her sobs, wriggling her shoulders.

"My head-scarf—I've lost it! . . . Dad brought it from the market, a blue one with flowers, and I put it on—and lost it." And she burst out crying again, still louder and more violently, gasping for breath and letting out strange little moans: o-o-o!

Lyonka felt powerless to help her and, draw-

ing timidly back from her, gazed thoughtfully and sadly at the darkening sky. He was feeling miserable and very sorry for the little girl.

"Don't cry! . . . Perhaps it'll turn up . . ." he whispered quietly but, noticing that she did not even hear his attempts to comfort her, edged away still further, thinking that she would probably be in bad trouble with her father for the loss. At once he saw in his mind's eye her father, a great, black Cossack, standing over the girl and striking her, and she, choking with tears and trembling with fear and pain, sinking to the ground at his feet. . . .

He stood up and walked away but, about five paces from her, turned abruptly back and, stopping directly in front of her, his back to the fence, struggled to think of something tender and kind. . . .

"Come, little girl, get up off the road! Now, stop crying, do now! Go home and tell them everything just as it happened. Just say you lost it. . . . What's a kerchief, after all?"

He had begun to speak in a quiet, sympathetic voice and, ending on an indignant exclamation, was delighted to see that she was getting up off the ground.

"That's fine now!" he went on, smiling and animated. "Now you go on home. Would you like me to come with you and tell them all about it? I'll back you up, don't be afraid."

Lyonka squared his shoulders proudly and looked about him.

"Better not. . . ." she whispered, slowly brushing the dust from her dress and struggling with her sobs.

"I will if you like," offered Lyonka very readily and tugged his cap down on one ear.

Now he was standing before her, his legs wide

apart, which made the rags he was wearing appear to be standing defiantly on end. He banged the ground firmly with his stick and looked her full in the face, his great sad eyes gleaming with dauntless pride.

The little girl gave him a sidelong glance as she wiped the tears all over her little face and, with another sigh, said:

“Better not, don’t come . . . Mum doesn’t like beggars.”

Whereupon she walked away from him, turning round twice to look back.

Lyonka felt deflated. Gradually, in slow movements he altered his challenging pose, hunched his back and reassumed his humble stance and, throwing his pack, which had been dangling from one hand, over his shoulder, shouted out after the girl who was already rounding the corner of the lane.

“Good-bye!”

She turned back to him without halting in her stride and disappeared.

Evening was drawing near and the air was heavy with that peculiar stifling oppressiveness which precedes a storm. The sun was low in the sky and the tops of the poplars were glowing with a delicate, reflected flush. At the same time the evening shadows which wrapped their lower branches made them, tall and motionless as they were, appear still more dense, still taller.... The sky above them was growing dark, too, becoming velvety and sinking lower and lower over the earth. Somewhere far away there was a sound of people talking and, even further—singing. These sounds, quiet but rich and deep, seemed to be permeated with the same stifling heaviness.

Lyonka felt even more lonely and even rather nervous. He decided to rejoin his grandfather,

looked around and went swiftly on along the lane. He did not feel like begging. He walked and felt the heart in his breast beating rapidly and he was overcome by a peculiar, lethargic reluctance to walk or to think.... At the same time, he could not get the little girl out of his mind and kept wondering: "What's happening to her now? If she's from a rich house they'll beat her: all the rich are misers; but if she's poor then maybe they won't.... In poor homes they love the children more 'cause they look forward to the time when they'll help with the work." One thought after another buzzed insistently through his head and the wearisome, soul-searing unhappiness which dogged these thoughts like a shadow became more oppressive and took ever firmer possession of him.

The evening shadows grew ever denser and heavier. Lyonka began to meet with occasional groups of Cossacks and their womenfolk who walked past without paying him any attention, having already become accustomed to the influx of famine-ridden Russians. He, too, spared their well-fed, strong figures no more than an apathetic, dull-eyed glance and made his way quickly past them towards the church—its cross was gleaming above the village in front of him.

The sound of a homebound herd was born towards him on the still air. Here was the church, a low, broad building with five blue-painted cupolas, planted about with poplars whose summits had grown higher than the crossess which shone pinky-gold through the green, bathed in the rays of the setting sun.

And there was his grandfather approaching the porch of the church, bending under the weight of his pack and looking about him, shading his eyes with his hand.

After his grandfather, with a heavy, shambling step, a Cossack was walking, his cap well-down over his eyes and a stick in his hand.

"Well, your pack's empty, is it?" asked the grandfather making his way towards his grandson who had stopped to wait for him at the entrance to the church-yard. "See how much I've collected!" And, grunting with effort, he swung a tightly-packed canvas sack from his shoulders to the ground. "Oof!... Very responsive, the people here! Ah, that's good!... Well, and what are you looking so down in the mouth for?"

"My head's aching," said Lyonka quietly, sinking down on the ground beside his grandfather.

"You don't say?... Tired?... We'll go and settle down for the night now. What was that Cossack called? Eh?"

"Andrei Chorny."

"We'll ask them: where's Chorny, Andrei? Where does he live? That's what we'll say. There's someone coming now. Yes.... Fine people, prosperous! And they eat nothing but wheat-en bread. Good day to you, good sir!"

The Cossack came right up to them and replied to the old man's greeting with deliberate emphasis:

"And good day to you, too!"

After which, straddling his legs and fixing them with his great, expressionless eyes, he scratched his head in silence.

Lyonka stared at him curiously, Arkhip blinked his old eyes enquiringly, the Cossack continued to say nothing and, finally, pushing his tongue half out, began to fish for the end of his moustache. Having successfully completed this operation, he sucked the moustache into his mouth,

chewed it, pushed it out again with the tip of his tongue and, at last, broke the silence which had already become oppressive, drawling lazily:

“Well, let’s go along to Headquarters.”

“What for?” The old man was suddenly all of a quake.

“Orders. Come along!”

He turned his back on them and would have started off but, glancing over his shoulder and seeing that neither of them had moved, cried out again, sharply this time:

“What are you waiting for?”

Then Lyonka and his grandfather set out after him.

Lyonka kept his eyes fixed on his grandfather and, seeing how his head and lips were quivering, how nervously he looked about him and how he hastily began to feel about under his shirt, felt sure that the old man had been up to no good again, like that last time in Taman. He felt thoroughly scared when he remembered that business in Taman. On that occasion, the old man had stolen some washing off the line and had been caught with it.

They had been laughed at, cursed, beaten up even and, finally, had been driven from the village in the middle of the night. They had slept on the sand somewhere on the shore of the sound and the sea had kept up a threatening grumble all night long. . . . The sand had creaked, shifted by the mounting waves, and all night long his grandfather had kept moaning and praying to God in a whisper, calling himself a thief and imploring forgiveness.

“Lyonka. . . .”

Lyonka, feeling a sudden dig in the ribs, started and looked round at his grandfather. The

old man's face was drawn, dry, grey and all of a tremble.

The Cossack was walking on about five paces ahead of them smoking his pipe, whacking the heads off thistles as he walked and not bothering to look back to see whether they were following.

"Take this, there!... Throw it... into the weeds... and mark the place where you throw it!... So's to pick it up afterwards..." whispered his grandfather scarcely audibly and, brushing up close against his grandson as he walked, pressed a piece of tightly rolled cloth into his hand.

Lyonka drifted off to one side, trembling with the terror that immediately froze his whole being, and edged over to the fence under which the weeds grew in a dense tangle. Staring tensely at the broad back of their Cossack escort, he pushed out his hand and, stealing a brief glance at the piece of cloth, dropped it into the grass....

As it fell the bundle opened out and a blue-flowered head-scarf fluttered for a moment before Lyonka's eyes, only to be obscured at once by the image of the little girl crying. He could see her as clearly as though she were really there, blotting out the Cossack, his grandfather and all around him... The sound of her sobs again came clearly to Lyonka's ears and it seemed to him as though her transparent tear-drops were falling on the earth before him.

In this almost insensate condition he trailed along behind his grandfather to the Cossack Headquarters, listened to a deep buzz of words which he made no effort to understand, saw as if through a mist how the bits and pieces from his grandfather's pack were emptied out onto a large table and heard how they plopped softly down onto the table.... Then many heads in high hats

bent down over the table; the heads and the hats were dark and frowning and from behind the mists which appeared to be wreathing all about them there seemed to emanate some frightful menace. Then, suddenly, his grandfather, spun round like a top in the hands of two sturdy young men, began mumbling something in a hoarse voice. . . .

“You’re on the wrong track, good Christians As God sees me, I’m not guilty!” his grandfather squealed piercingly.

Lyonka, bursting into tears, sank to the floor.

Then they came up to him, lifted him, sat him on a bench and searched through all the rags which clad his small, skinny body.

“Danilovna’s lying, the damned woman!” roared someone in a rich, angry voice as painful to Lyonka as a box on the ears.

“Maybe they got it hidden somewhere?” the answering suggestion was even louder.

Lyonka felt that all these noises were striking him about the head and he became so frightened that he lost consciousness as though he had dived head-first into a black, fathomless pit which suddenly yawned open to swallow him.

When he opened his eyes, his head was lying on his grandfather’s knees, his grandfather’s face was bent over him, more pathetic and wrinkled than usual and, from his grandfather’s nervously blinking eyes, small opaque tears were dripping onto his, Lyonka’s, forehead and tickling terribly as they ran over his cheeks and down his neck. . . .

“Come to, have you, sonny?! Let’s get out of here. Come on, they’ve let us go, curse them!”

Lyonka rose, feeling as though something heavy had been poured into his head and that at any moment it might drop from his should-

ers. He took it in his hands and swayed, moaning quietly.

"Your poor head's aching, is it? My poor little lad! . . . They've pestered the life out of us. . . . Brutes! A dagger's been lost, d'you see, and a little girl's mislaid her scarf, and what must they do but all go and gang up against us! Eh, Lord, Lord! Why art thou so straightening us?"

The old man's wheezing voice touched Lyonka on the raw and he felt a pricking spark burn up inside him which made him draw away from his grandfather. Having withdrawn a little he looked round. . . .

They were sitting on the outskirts of the village in the dense shadow of a gnarled black poplar. It was already night, the moon had come up and its milky silver light, pouring out over the flat immensities of the steppe, seemed to make it somehow narrower than in the daytime, narrower and still more wretched and desolate. From far away, from the line where the steppe ran into the sky, the clouds billowed up quietly and quietly sailed above the steppe, blotting out the moon and casting impenetrable shadows onto the earth beneath them. The shadows lay thick on the earth and crawled slowly and thoughtfully over it and then, suddenly, disappeared as though hiding in the cracks of the earth. . . . Voices sounded from the village and here and there lights came on and winked up at the brilliant, golden stars.

"Come on, laddy! . . . We must be getting on," said the grandfather.

"Let's sit for a little longer!" said Lyonka quietly.

He loved the steppe. Trudging over it in the daylight he liked to look ahead to where the vault of heaven came down to rest on its wide breast. Away over there he imagined big and wonderful

towns inhabited by kindly people such as he had never met with, of whom it would not be necessary to beg bread. They would give of themselves, without being asked. And when the steppe, stretching wider and wider before his eyes, would suddenly reveal just another village, familiar before he reached it, its buildings and people just like all those that he had seen before, he would feel sad, hurt, cheated.

So now he was thoughtfully gazing out into the distance towards the slowly gathering clouds. He saw them as smoke from the thousands of chimneys of that town which he so desired to see.... His day-dreaming was interrupted by his grandfather's dry coughing.

Lyonka looked hard at his grandfather's face, wet with tears as he gasped avidly for air.

Illumined by the moon and scoured by strange shadows falling from the ragged hat, the brows and the beard, this face with its desperately working mouth and wide-open eyes beaming with a kind of secret rapture was at once frightening and pathetic, and awoke in Lyonka some new feeling which made him move a little away from his grandfather....

"Well, we shall sit for a little longer, then, a little longer!" the old man muttered and, giggling foolishly, began to feel around in the front of his shirt.

Lyonka turned from him and again began to look away into the distance.

"Lyonka! Look here!" his grandfather exclaimed suddenly on a gasp of enthusiasm and, still doubled up by the suffocating cough, handed his grandson something long and shining. "It's chased with silver! Silver, do you hear me? It's worth all of 50 rubles!...."

His hands and lips were aquiver with pain and

the lust for money and his whole face was twitching.

Lyonka shuddered and pushed away his hand.

"Hide it! Oh, granddad, hide it quick!" he whispered imploringly, casting a hasty glance round him.

"Now what's the matter with you, silly boy? Afraid, my dear? ... I just looked into the window and there it was hanging there.... I grabbed it—and—under my coat with it.... And then I hid it in the bushes. As we went out of the village I pretended to drop my hat, bent down and picked it up.... They're fools! ... And I got back the scarf, too—here it is!"

With trembling hands he extracted the scarf from among his rags and waved it in front of Lyonka's nose.

A mist curtain seemed to fall apart before Lyonka's eyes to disclose the following picture: he and his grandfather are walking as quickly as they can along the main street of the village, avoiding the eyes of the people they meet, walking in fear, and it seems to Lyonka that everyone who wishes to has the right to strike them, spit at them, cover them with abuse.... All their surroundings, the fences, the houses, the trees, are rocking in a strange kind of fog as though from a great wind ... and there is a buzz of stern, angry voices....

This miserable road stretches on and on, and the way out from the village into the fields is hidden by the rocking houses which now press down upon them as though to crush them, now withdraw to laugh in their faces from the dark patches which are their windows.... And, suddenly, there is a ringing cry from one of the windows: "Thieves! Thieves! Thieves and pilferers!" Lyonka steals a glance in the direction

of the voice and at the window he catches sight of the little girl whom he had not so long ago seen weeping and wanted to protect. She catches his eye and puts out her tongue, and her black eyes sparkle angrily and sharply and pierce Lyonka like needles.

This picture arose in the boy's mind and disappeared immediately leaving behind it the malicious smile with which he now faced his grandfather.

The old man was still mumbling on, interrupting himself with his cough, gesticulating, shaking his head and wiping away the sweat which welled up in great drops along the wrinkles of his face.

A heavy cloud, all ragged and torn, had come up and covered the moon, and Lyonka could hardly see his grandfather's face. . . . But beside him he placed the image of the weeping girl, and weighed them against one another in the scales of his thought. Besides her, injured by him, all in tears but healthy, fresh and beautiful, Lyonka's sick, avaricious, tattered grandfather with his creaking joints and rasping voice seemed altogether superfluous—almost as wicked and foul as Kashchey from the fairy tale. How could he? Why had he injured her? She was no kin of his. . . .

And his grandfather wheezed on:

"If only I could save a hundred rubles! . . . Then I would die in peace. . . ."

"Stop it!" something seemed to flare up inside Lyonka. "Better keep your mouth shut! I'd die, you say, I'd die. . . . But you don't die. . . . You steal!" squealed Lyonka and suddenly, all of a tremble, leapt to his feet. "You're an old thief! . . . Oo-oo!" And, clenching his dry little fist, he began shaking it before the nose of his suddenly

silent grandfather and sunk heavily back to earth again, continuing between his teeth: "You stole from a child . . Ah, a fine way to behave! . . An old man, and still a sinner. . . . There'll be no pardon for you in heaven for this!"

Suddenly, the whole steppe flickered and, lit up from end to end in blinding blue, was exposed in all its immeasurable vastness. Momentarily, the darkness in which it had been hidden lifted. . . . There was a clap of thunder. Roaring and vibrating it rolled across the steppe, shaking both the earth and the sky, which was now covered with a swiftly flying wrack of black cloud which had quite drowned the moon.

It became very dark. Somewhere far away the lightning was playing, silently as yet but menacingly, and a second later another, fainter growl of thunder sounded. Then silence fell, a silence which, it seemed, was never to be broken.

Lyonka crossed himself. His grandfather sat silent and motionless, as though he had grown into the trunk of the tree against which he was leaning.

"Granddad!" whispered Lyonka, fearfully awaiting a new clap of thunder. "Let's go back to the village!"

The sky shuddered and again flared up in blue flame, striking the earth with vast, metallic power. It was as though thousands of sheets of iron were being scattered over the earth, clattering against one another as they fell. . . .

"Granddad!" shouted Lyonka.

His shout, deadened by the echo of the thunder, sounded more like the chime of a little broken bell.

"What's the matter? Afraid?" his grandfather said hoarsely, without moving.

Great drops of rain began to fall and the whis-

per of them was so mysterious that it seemed like a warning . Far away it had already increased to a widespread, continuous sound like a huge brush sweeping over the dry earth—but here, where the two were sitting, every drop which fell to the earth sounded short and sharp and died away without echo The claps of thunder came nearer and nearer and the sky flared more often.

“I won’t go to the village! Let the rain drown me here, old dog, thief that I am, let the thunder strike me dead,” said Arkhip, struggling for breath. “I won’t go! You go alone.... There it is, the village.... Go on! I don’t want you sitting here.... Go on!... Go, go!... Go!....”

The old man was already shouting, hoarsely and without resonance.

“Granddad!... Forgive me!” Lyonka implored him, moving nearer.

“I won’t go.... I won’t forgive.... Seven years I’ve mothered you!... Everything... for you... I lived... for you. Do you think I have any needs for myself?... I’m dying. Dying... and you say —a thief.... Why am I a thief? For you... it’s all for you.... There, take it... take it... go on.... To set you up in life... for you... I saved... and yes, I stole.... God sees everything.... He knows... that I stole... knows.... He’ll punish me. He won’t forgive me, old dog that I am... for stealing. He’s punished me already.... Lord! Hast thou punished me?... Eh? Hast thou? Thou hast slain me with the hand of a child!... Rightly, O Lord!... Quite right!... Thou art just, O Lord!... Go on, send for my soul... Oh!”

The old man’s voice had risen to a piercing squeal which struck terror into Lyonka’s breast.

The claps of thunder which were shaking the steppe and the sky now reverberated in bustling

chaos of echoes as though each of them wanted to say something particular and necessary to the earth, each hurying to shout the other down in an almost continuous uproar. The lightning-torn sky quivered, the steppe was rumbling, now ablaze with blue fire, now plunged in cold, heavy, dense darkness which made it strangely smaller and narrower. Sometimes the lightning lit up the most distant parts of the steppe. And these distant parts, so it seemed, were fleeing precipitously from all the sound and the roaring.

The rain began to pour down and its drops, shining like steel in the flashes of lightning, blotted out the welcoming twinkle of the village lights.

Lyonka was paralysed with fear, cold and a miserable sense of guilt born of his grandfather's outburst. He looked straight ahead with wide open eyes and, fearing to so much as blink even when the drops of water rolled down into them from his rain-drenched hair, he listened for the voice of his grandfather, drowned out by the sea of mighty sounds.

Lyonka felt that his grandfather was sitting motionless but it seemed to him that he was about to disappear, to go off somewhere or other and to leave him all alone. Hardly realising what he was doing, he edged closer and closer to his grandfather and, when he touched him with his elbow, he shuddered, expecting something terrible.

Rending the sky, the lightning illuminated the pair of them, side by side, bent and small, under the water which poured down on them from the branches of the tree....

The grandfather waved his arms in the air and kept muttering something, wearily now and breathing very laboriously.

Looking him in the face, Lyonka cried out in fear... In the blue gleam of the lightning it appeared dead and the dull, rolling eyes were the eyes of a madman.

“Granddad! Let's go!” he squealed, hiding his face in his grandfather's knees.

The old man bent down to him, embracing him with his skinny, bony arms and, hugging him hard, let out a sudden strong, piercing howl like a wolf caught in a trap.

Goaded almost to madness by this howling Lyonka tore away from him, jumped to his feet and ran off straight ahead, eyes wide open, blinded by the lightning, falling, scrambling to his feet and plunging even further into the darkness, now dispersed by the blue flame of the lightning, now closing in again densely around the panic-stricken boy.

And the sound of the falling rain was cold, monotonous, desolate. And it seemed that in all the steppe there was no one and nothing but the sound of the rain, the flashing of the lightning and the angry roar of the thunder.

The morning of the following day, some boys who had run out beyond the outskirts of the village turned back at once and raised the alarm, announcing that they had seen the beggar of yesterday under a black poplar and that he had most probably had his throat cut because an abandoned dagger was lying beside him.

However, when the elder Cossacks came to look they found that this was not so. The old man was still alive. When they went up to him he tried to rise from the ground but could not. He had lost the power of speech, but his tearful eyes held a question and searched and searched

from face to face in the crowd but found no answer.

Towards evening he died and they buried him where they had found him, under the black poplar, considering that he did not merit a place in hallowed ground. Firstly, he was a stranger, secondly—a thief, and thirdly, he had died without absolution. Beside him in the mud they found the dagger and the scarf.

A few days later they found Lyonka.

Above one of the long steppe gullies not far from the village a flock of crows began to circle and when they went to look they found a little boy lying face downwards, arms outthrown, in the liquid mud which the storm had left at the bottom of the gully.

At first they decided to bury him in the church burial ground because he was still a child, but after some deliberation decided to lay him together with his grandfather under the same black poplar. Here they raised a mound of earth and, on the top of it, erected a rough, stone cross.

1893

Looking him in the face, Lyonka cried out in fear . . . In the blue gleam of the lightning it appeared dead and the dull, rolling eyes were the eyes of a madman.

"Granddad! Let's go!" he squealed, hiding his face in his grandfather's knees.

The old man bent down to him, embracing him with his skinny, bony arms and, hugging him hard, let out a sudden strong, piercing howl like a wolf caught in a trap.

Goaded almost to madness by this howling Lyonka tore away from him, jumped to his feet and ran off straight ahead, eyes wide open, blinded by the lightning, falling, scrambling to his feet and plunging even further into the darkness, now dispersed by the blue flame of the lightning, now closing in again densely around the panic-stricken boy.

And the sound of the falling rain was cold, monotonous, desolate. And it seemed that in all the steppe there was no one and nothing but the sound of the rain, the flashing of the lightning and the angry roar of the thunder.

The morning of the following day, some boys who had run out beyond the outskirts of the village turned back at once and raised the alarm, announcing that they had seen the beggar of yesterday under a black poplar and that he had most probably had his throat cut because an abandoned dagger was lying beside him.

However, when the elder Cossacks came to look they found that this was not so. The old man was still alive. When they went up to him he tried to rise from the ground but could not. He had lost the power of speech, but his tearful eyes held a question and searched and searched

from face to face in the crowd but found no answer.

Towards evening he died and they buried him where they had found him, under the black poplar, considering that he did not merit a place in hallowed ground. Firstly, he was a stranger, secondly—a thief, and thirdly, he had died without absolution. Beside him in the mud they found the dagger and the scarf.

A few days later they found Lyonka.

Above one of the long steppe gullies not far from the village a flock of crows began to circle and when they went to look they found a little boy lying face downwards, arms outthrown, in the liquid mud which the storm had left at the bottom of the gully.

At first they decided to bury him in the church burial ground because he was still a child, but after some deliberation decided to lay him together with his grandfather under the same black poplar. Here they raised a mound of earth and, on the top of it, erected a rough, stone cross.

1893

ONE AUTUMN

. . . One autumn I got myself into a very awkward and uncomfortable situation: in the town where I had just arrived and where I did not know a living soul I found myself without a kopek in my pocket and without a roof over my head.

Having, in the first few days, sold all those parts of my clothing which I could possibly do without, I left the town for a place called Ustye where there were wharves and, in the season when the waters were navigable, a seethingly busy workaday life, but which now lay silent and deserted—it was going on for the end of October.

Splashing over the damp sand and raking it with a persistent eye in the hopes of finding some deposits of edible matter, I wandered lonely amongst the desolate buildings and trading booths and thought about what an excellent thing it is to have a full stomach. . . .

At this stage of cultural development it is easier to satisfy spiritual than bodily hunger. You wander along streets surrounded by houses, tolerably handsome from without and—it is more than a fair guess—tolerably comfortable within; this may induce pleasant thoughts on the subject of architecture, hygiene and many other wise and lofty matters; you meet people dressed in warm, comfortable clothes—they are polite, always stepping aside to let you pass, tactfully refusing to notice the regrettable fact of your existence. Indeed, the soul of a hungry man is always better

and more healthfully nourished than the soul of a full man—a paradox from which it is no doubt possible to draw some extremely astute conclusion in favour of the well-fed! . . .

. . . Evening was coming on, it was raining and the wind blew fitfully from the north. It whistled through the empty booths and stalls, beat on the boarded windows of the hotels and whipped the waves of the river into high, white crests of foam which hurried rank upon rank in the murky distance, leaping over one another in their haste. . . . It was as though the river felt the approach of winter and was running in terror from the fetters of ice which might be laid on it that very night by the north wind. The sky was heavy and dark, and from it fell a constant spatter of fine rain, scarcely visible to the eye; the sad, elegiac nature of my surroundings was set off by two broken and hideous willows and an upside-down boat at their roots.

The upside-down vessel with its broken keel and the trees stripped by the cold wind, old and pathetic. . . . Everything about me was broken-down, barren and dead, and the sky wept ceaseless tears. Desolate and dark it was around me—it seemed as though everything were dying, as though soon I alone would be left alive and that cold death was waiting for me, also.

And at that time I was seventeen—a splendid age!

I walked and walked over the cold, damp sand, my teeth chattering out trills in honour of hunger and cold and, suddenly, walking round the back of one of the booths in my vain search for something to eat—I saw, doubled up on the ground, a figure in a woman's dress, all soaked with rain and clinging to the bent shoulders. Stopping beside her, I looked down to see what she was

doing. It appeared that she was digging a hole in the sand with her hands, tunnelling underneath the booth.

"What are you doing that for?" I asked, squatting down on my heels beside her.

She gave a stifled cry and leapt swiftly to her feet. Now, when she stood and stared at me with wide-open fearful eyes, I saw that it was a young girl of my own age with a very sweet-looking little face, marked, unfortunately, by three large bluises. This spoilt the impression, although the bluises were distributed with an exquisite sense of balance—one beneath each eye, both of the same size, and another, somewhat larger, on the forehead, just above the bridge of the nose. In this symmetry could be seen the work of an artist of real refinement in the business of spoiling other people's beauty.

The girl looked at me and the fear in her eyes slowly died away.... In a moment she had shaken her hands free from sand and adjusted her cotton headscarf, huddled herself against the wind and said:

"You're hungry too, aren't you? You dig for a bit then, my hands are tired. There's bread in there," she nodded towards the booth. "That stall's still open...."

I began to dig. She, on her part, waited for a little and then, having watched me for a while, squatted down beside me and began to help.

We worked in silence. I could not say now whether at that moment I remembered about the criminal code, morality, property and such-like things which, according to those who know, we ought to bear in mind at every moment of our lives. Wishing to stick to the truth as closely as possible, I must admit that, as far as I can remember, I was so absorbed in the business of

tunnelling under the wall of the booth that I completely forgot about everything except what might be found in that booth. . . .

Evening was coming on. Darkness—damp, raw, cold—was thickening all about us. The sound of the waves seemed less boisterous than before, but the rain drummed on the boards of the booth ever louder and harder. Somewhere, we could already hear the sound of the night-watchman's rattle.

"Is there a floor or not?" my assistant asked me quietly. I did not understand what she was talking about and said nothing.

"I mean, is there a floor to the booth? If there is, we may be breaking in all for nothing. We'll dig the tunnel and then, maybe, there'll be thick planks to get through as well. . . . How'll you prize them open? Better break the padlock . . . the padlock's not strong. . . ."

Good ideas seldom visit the heads of women; however, as you see, it does happen. I always was one to appreciate good ideas and always did my best to put them into practice in so far as I was able.

Having found the padlock, I gave it a sharp tug and pulled it out together with the rings. My confederate bent down and darted snakelike into the booth through the oblong opening thus revealed.

"Well done!" she called out approvingly.

One word of praise from a woman is dearer to me than a whole ode from a man, though the man in question be as eloquent as all the ancient orators rolled into one. At that moment, however, my mind was given to less galant considerations than at this present and, taking no notice of the girl's compliment, I asked her briefly and fearfully:

"Anything there?"

In a monotonous voice she began to tell over her discoveries.

"A basket of old bottles . . . sacks, empty . . . an umbrealla . . . an iron bucket."

All quite inedible. I felt my hopes sinking. . . . But suddenly she cried out in an animated voice.

"Aha! Got it. . . ."

"What?"

"Bread . . . a round loaf, white . . . wet, though . . . catch!"

The round loaf rolled out to my feet and close behind it came my valiant partner in crime. I had already broken off a small piece, stuffed it into my mouth and begun chewing. . . .

"Here, give me some . . . we must get away from here, though. Where could we go?" She peered all around her, her eyes straining to pierce the murk. . . . It was dark, wet, full of sounds. . . . "Over there there's an upturned boat. . . . What about it?"

"Let's go!" And we went, breaking off bits of our loot as we walked and stuffing them into our mouths. . . . The rain was falling harder, the river roared, from somewhere or other there sounded a long, derisive whistle, as though some enormous being who did not know the meaning of fear were mocking everybody and everything, including the foul autumn evening and us, its two heroes. . . . At the sound of that whistle something seemed to clutch at my heart; nevertheless, I ate avidly, as did the girl now keeping pace with me on my left.

"What is your name?" something prompted me to ask.

"Natasha!" she answered, champing vigorously.

I looked at her and my heart contracted painfully. I looked into the darkness ahead, and it

seemed to me that the ugly, ironic usage of my destiny was smiling at me—a secretive, cold smile....

...The rain drummed relentlessly on the wooden boat, the muffled noise suggesting sad thoughts, and the wind whistled, penetrating the broken bottom through a wide crack in which a loose piece of plank was flapping and creaking on a plaintive note of apprehension. The waves of the river slapped against the bank, they sounded monotonous and hopeless, as though they were telling over something inexpressively boring and unpleasant, something of which they were weary to the point of repulsion, something from which they would have liked to run away but about which it was nevertheless imperative that they should speak. The sound of the rain became one with their slapping and above the upturned boat swam the long-drawn-out, heaving sighing of the earth, weary and offended at these eternal changes from brilliant, warm summer to cold, damp and foggy autumn. The wind rushed blindly on over the desolate shore and the foaming river, on and on, singing cheerless songs....

Our accommodation under the boat was devoid of comfort: it was cramped, damp and, through the hole in the bottom, small, cold drops of rain came spraying and eddies of wind kept bursting their way in on us.... We sat in silence and shivered with cold I wanted to sleep, I remember. Natasha was leaning her back against the side of the boat, curled up into a little ball. Cuddling her knees up to her chin, she was staring fixedly at the river, her eyes wide open—on the white blur of her face they seemed immense because of the bruises below them. She did not move. This stillness and silence—I felt—were gradually

imbuing me with a kind of dread of my companion.... I wanted to get her to talk but did not know how to begin.

She was the first to speak

"What a bloody life!" she pronounced distinctly, precisely and in a tone of utmost conviction.

Yet it was not a complaint. The words held too much indifference for a complaint. You felt that she had thought things out in her own way, had thought things out and come to a certain conclusion which she had expressed aloud and which I could not contradict without being false to myself. So I said nothing. And she, as though unaware of my presence, continued to sit motionless.

"To lie down and die, that'd be one way out I suppose..." Natasha spoke again, softly this time, and thoughtfully.... And once again her words held no suggestion of complaint.... It was clear that, having given due thought to life in general, she had surveyed her own case and calmly come to the conclusion that she was not in a position to undertake any other measure to protect herself against the outrages of life than, as she had said, "to lie down and die".

I felt an unbearable wave of nausea at such clarity of thought and knew that, unless I said something quick, I would most certainly burst into tears.... And that I was ashamed to do in front of a woman, more especially as she was not crying. I decided to try talking to her.

"Who beat you up?" I asked unable to think of anything more intelligent.

"Pashka, of course, as usual..." she answered, calmly and loudly.

"And who is he?"

"The boy-friend.... A baker...."

"Does he beat you often? . . ."

"Whenever he gets drunk. . . ."

Then, suddenly, moving over to sit beside me she began to tell me about herself, Pashka and the relationship between them. She was "one of these girls, you know, who . . ." and he was a baker with a ginger moustache and played the accordion very well. He used to visit her "at Madam's" and she liked him very much because he was good company and his clothes were clean. His coat was worth 15 rubles and he wore soft wrinkled leather boots. On these heads she had fallen in love with him and he had become her "special friend". No sooner had he become her "special friend", however, than he began taking the money which other clients gave her for sweets and, getting drunk on it, took to beating her—and that wouldn't have been so bad, only he began to go with other girls before her very eyes. . . .

"And how can I help taking it to heart? It's not as if I was any worse than all others. . . . So he just does it to spite me, the swine. The day before yesterday I got leave from Madam to go for a walk, went to his place and found Doonka sitting there, drunk. And he was pretty well blotto too. I says to him: 'A swine, you are, a real swine! You're a double crosser!' And he beat me black and blue. Used his feet, he did, and pulled my hair—the lot. . . . But that wouldn't be so bad! Only he tore everything. . . . And what am I to do now? How can I face Madam? Tore everything: my dress and the jacket—brand new, it was. . . . And pulled the scarf off my head. . . . Oh God, what am I to do now?" Her voice broke suddenly into a dismal wail.

And the wind wailed too, growing ever stronger and colder. . . . My teeth had begun to dance again. She, too, was all huddled up against the

cold and had moved so near me that I could see her eyes shining in the dark.

"You're a bad lot, you men, I'd trample you all under foot, I would, I'd tear you limb from limb. If one of you lay there dying . . . I'd spit in his ugly mug, I would, and not even feel sorry for him! Worthless brutes! . . . You whine and whine and wag your tails like a lot of filthy dogs, but if you find a fool of a woman ready to take pity on you, then that's the end! You're trampling her underfoot before she knows what's struck her . . . lousy gigolos!"

Her swearing was extremely varied, but the words lacked power; neither anger nor real hatred of the "lousy gigolos" could I distinguish in them. In general, the tone of her speech was calm out of all proportion to what she was actually saying and her voice sadly monotonous.

Nevertheless, all this affected me more strongly than the most eloquent and convincing pessimistic books and speeches of which I had read and heard quite a few, both before and afterwards, and which I read and listen to up to this very day. And that, you see, is because the agony of the dying is always far more natural and impressive than the most exact and artistic descriptions of death.

I was feeling rotten, probably more because of the cold than because of my fellow-lodger's conversation. I groaned softly and my teeth chattered.

Then, almost in the same instant, I felt two cold little hands—one touching my neck, the other coming to rest on my face and, at the same time, came the concerned, quiet, gentle question:

"What's the matter with you?"

I was ready to think that it was someone else addressing me and not the Natasha who had only

just declared that all men were swine and wished them all to perdition. But already she was speaking quickly and hurriedly....

"What's the matter? Eh? Cold, are you? Getting a chill? You are a one, aren't you? Sitting there not saying nothing.... Like an owl! You should have told me you were cold long ago.... There.... lie down on the ground, stretch yourself out.... And I'll lie down.... That's it! Now hug me ... tighter.... There now, you ought to feel warm now.... And afterwards—we'll lie back to back.... We'll last the night somehow.... What's gone wrong, not taken to drink, have you? Lost your job?... Never mind!"

She was trying to comfort me.... To put new heart into me....

May I be thrice accursed! How ironical all this was! Just think, there was I seriously concerned with the fate of humanity, dreaming of reorganising the whole social order, of politics and revolution, having read a variety of devilishly wise books whose profundity was most probably beyond even their authors' comprehension, and, at that time, preparing to devote myself to becoming a "heavy-weight active force". Yet here I was being warmed by the body of a prostitute, a miserable, beaten, desperate being who had no place in life and was considered worthless and whom I had not had the wit to help before as she helped me and, even had I thought to do so, would scarcely have known how to go about it.

Oh, I was ready to think that all this was happening to me in a dream, an absurd, unhappy dream....

But alas! I had no right to think that, because cold drops of rain were splattering down upon me, the woman's breast was pressed hard against my chest, I could feel her warm breath on my

face, even if it did carry a suggestion of vodka . . . nevertheless—so resuscitating. . . . The wind howled and moaned, the rain beat upon the boat, the waves slapped and even we in our close embrace were still trembling with cold. All this was absolutely real, and I am convinced that no one has ever had such a bad and miserable dream as that reality.

And there was Natasha talking, talking on about something or other, tenderly and sympathetically as only women can talk. Under the influence of the naive and tender things she was saying a kind of small flame burned up feebly inside me, and the warmth from it thawed my heart.

Then a hail of tears began rolling from my eyes, washing from my heart much of the bitterness, longing, stupidity and dirt which had settled over it like scum before that night. . . . Natasha kept trying to cheer me:

“That’ll do, dearie, don’t cry! That’ll do! With God’s help you’ll get over it, you’ll get your job back. . . .” and much of the same sort. . . .

And she kept kissing me, showering me with warm, generous kisses.

These were the first woman’s kisses which life had granted me and they were the best, for all the rest cost me terribly dear and gave me practically nothing.

“There, there, don’t cry, silly! I’ll fix you up tomorrow if you’ve nowhere to go. . . .” I heard her quiet, reassuring whisper as though through sleep. . . .

...We lay in each other’s arms until dawn. . . .

When it was light, we crawled out from under the boat and went into the town. . . . Then we took a friendly farewell of one another and parted never to meet again, although for six months I

searched through all the slums for that sweet Natasha, with whom, one autumn, I spent the night which I have just described....

If she is already dead—what a splendid thing that would be for her—may she rest in peace! And if she is alive—peace be unto her!

And may her soul never waken to a sense of sin ... for that would be a superfluous grief to her and could make no difference to her way of life....

1894

SONG OF THE FALCON

The boundless sea, lapping lazily where the shore-line ran, slumbering motionless in the distance, was steeped in blue moonlight. Soft and silvery, it merged at the horizon with the blue of the southern sky and slept soundly, mirroring the transparent fabric of fleecy clouds that also hung motionless, veiling, but not concealing, the golden tracery of the stars. The sky seemed to be bending down to the sea, trying to catch what the restless waves were whispering as they washed languidly over the shore.

The mountains, covered with wind-twisted trees, hurled their jagged peaks into the blue waste above, where their harsh contours were softened by the warm and caressing darkness of the southern night.

The mountains were gravely contemplative. Their dark shadows lay like confining garments upon the surging green waves, as if they wished to stay the tide, to silence the ceaseless plashing of the water, the sighing of the foam—all sounds violating the mysterious silence which flooded the scene, as did the silvery blue radiance of a moon not yet emerged from behind mountain peaks.

“Al-lah ak-bar!” came softly from the lips of Nadir Ragim Ogly, an aged Crimean herdsman—tall, white-haired, tanned by southern sun—a lean and wise old man.

He and I were lying in the sand beside a huge rock draped in shadow and overgrown by moss

—a sad and sombre rock that had broken away from its native mountain. One side of it was festooned with seaweed and water plants which seemed to bind it to the narrow strip of sand between sea and mountains. The flames of our camp-fire lighted the shore-side, and their flicker sent shadows dancing upon its ancient surface, scarred by a network of deep cracks.

Ragim and I were boiling some fish we had just caught, and we were both in a mood that made everything seem lucid, inspired, accessible to the understanding; our hearts were light and innocent and the only thing we wanted to do was lie here and dream.

The sea lapped at the shore, the sound of the waves so gentle that they seemed begging to warm themselves at our fire. Now and then the even hum of the surf was interrupted by a higher and more playful note: that would be one of the bolder waves creeping to our very feet.

Ragim lay facing the sea, his elbows dug into the sand, his head in his hands, gazing thoughtfully into the shadowy distance. His sheepskin hat had slipped to the back of his head and a fresh sea breeze fanned his high forehead covered with fine lines. He made philosophical observations, without caring whether I listened or not, as if he were talking to the sea.

“A man who serves God faithfully goes to heaven. And one who does not serve God or the Prophet? Maybe he’s out there—in that foam. Maybe those silver spots on the water are him. Who knows?”

The dark and heaving sea grew brighter, and patches of moonlight were scattered haphazardly over its surface. The moon had slipped out from behind the shaggy mountain-tops and was now dreamily pouring its radiance on the shore, on

the rock beside which we were lying, and on the sea, which rose to meet it with a little sigh.

"Ragim, tell me a story," I said to the old man.

"What for?" he asked, without turning his head.

"Oh, just because I like your stories."

"I've told you all of them. I don't know any more."

He wanted to be coaxed, and I coaxed him.

"If you want me to, I'll sing you a song," he consented.

I was only too glad to listen to one of his old songs, and so he began reciting in a sing-song voice, trying to preserve the cadence of the ancient melody.

I

High in the mountains crawled a Snake, and it came to rest in a misty gorge looking down on the sea.

High in the sky shone the sun, and the breath of the mountains rose hot in the sky, and the waves down below broke loud on the rocks.

And swift through the gorge, through the darkness and mist, flowed a river, up-turning the stones in its rush to the sea.

Crested with foam, vigorous, hoary, it cut through the rock and plunged to the sea with an angry roar.

Suddenly a Falcon with blood on its wings and a wound in its breast fell out of the sky into the gorge where the Snake lay coiled.

It uttered a cry as it struck the earth and lay beating its wings on the rock in despair.

The Snake was frightened and darted away,

but soon it saw that the bird was doomed, that the bird would die in a minute or two.

So back it crawled to the wounded bird and tauntingly hissed in its ear:

“So soon must thou die?”

“So soon must I die,” said the Falcon, sighing. “But oh, I have lived! I have tasted of happiness, fought a good fight! I have soared in the sky! Never shalt thou, poor thing, see the sky as have I!”

“The sky? What is that? Why, nothing at all. Could I crawl in the sky? Far better this gorge—so warm and so damp.”

Thus said the Snake to the Falcon, the lover of freedom. And it laughed in its heart at the Falcon’s brave words.

And it thought to itself: what matters it whether one flies or one crawls? The end is the same: all will lie in the earth, all to dust will return.

Of a sudden the Falcon up-lifted its head and swept the dark gorge with a tortured glance.

Water came oozing from cracks in the rock, and the air of the gorge smelt of death and decay.

With a mighty effort the Falcon cried out in sorrow and longing:

“Ah, to soar in the sky, to soar once again! . . . I would capture the foe . . . crush his head to my breast . . . make him choke on my blood. . . . Oh, the joy of the struggle!”

Thought the Snake: it must really be fine to live in the sky if it wrings such a cry from the Falcon!

And it said to the Falcon, the lover of freedom: “Crawl out to the cliff’s edge and throw thyself over. Perhaps thy wings will carry thee still, and again thou shalt soar in the sky.”

A tremor passed over the Falcon. It gave a proud cry and crawled out on the cliff, seeking a hold in the slime.

And on reaching the edge it spread wide its wings, drew a deep breath, and, with a flash of its eyes, plunged into space.

Swift as a stone fell the Falcon, scattering feathers, tearing its wings as it fell.

A wave caught it up, washed it of blood, wrapped it in foam, and carried it down to the sea.

Mournful the cry of the waves as they broke on the face of the cliff. And gone was the bird—lost to sight in the vast expanse of the sea.

II

For long the Snake lay coiled in the gorge, pondering the death of the bird, pondering its love of the sky.

And it glanced up into the sky, where the restless heart sees a promise of happiness.

“What did it see, that hapless Falcon, in emptiness—space without end? Why should such birds rob others of peace with their passion for soaring? What is revealed in the sky? All this can I learn in a single flight, be it ever so brief.”

Thus having spoken, it coiled itself tighter, leaped into space, and flashed, a dark streak, in the sun.

But never shall those born to crawl, learn to fly. Down on the rocks fell the Snake, but not to its death did it fall. It laughed, and it said:

“So this is the joy of the flight: the joy of the fall! Oh, foolish birds! Unhappy on earth, which they know not, they would climb to the sky and live in its throbbing expanses. But what is the sky but an emptiness? Light in abundance, but nothing to sustain the body. Why, then, such pride? And why such contempt? To hide from the world their mad aspirations, their failure to

cope with the business of life? Ridiculous birds! Never again will your words deceive me. For now I know all, I have seen the sky. I have been there and explored it; and out of the sky have I fallen, though not to my death. All the stronger has grown my faith in myself. Let them live with illusions who love not the earth. I have found out the truth. Never again shall I heed the birds' challenge. Born of the earth, I am earthly."

So saying, it coiled on a stone, full of pride in itself.

The sea was shining, a dazzle of light, and fiercely the waves beat the shore.

In their leonine roar rang the song of the Falcon. Trembled the rocks from the blows of the sea; trembled the sky from the notes of the song:

"We sing a song to the madness of daring!

"The madness of daring is the wisdom of life. Oh, Falcon undaunted! Thou hast shed precious blood in the fight with the foe, but the time will yet come when the drops of thy blood will glow like sparks in the gloom of life and fire brave hearts with love of freedom and light.

"Thou hast paid with thy life. But thou shalt live on in the songs of the brave, a proud challenge to struggle for freedom and light!

"We sing a song to the madness of daring!"

... Silent are the opalescent reaches of the sea. Softly sing the waves lapping the shore, and I, too, am silent as I gaze into the distance. Now there are more silvery patches of moonlight on the water. . . . Our kettle is humming quietly.

One of the waves outdistances its brothers and gives a mocking little cry as it reaches for Ragim's head.

"Get back! Where do you think you're going?"

cries Ragim, waving his hand, and the wave rolls back obediently.

I find nothing funny or startling in Ragim's personification of the wave. Everything about us is exceptionally alive, gentle and soothing. The sea is calm, and one feels power in the cool breath it wafts towards mountain peaks still charged with the heat of the day. In golden letters upon the dark blue background of the sky the stars have traced a solemn message, something enchanting the soul and disturbing the mind with the sweet expectation of a revelation.

Everything is drowsing, but with tense awareness, as if in another moment all objects would shake off their slumber and lift their voices in a choir of unutterably sweet harmony. This harmony would speak of the mysteries of life, would explain them to the mind and then extinguish the mind like a phantom flame and whisk the soul up into the blue spaces of the night where the delicate tracery of the stars sings the same divine music of revelation.

KONOVALOV

As I was glancing through the paper I came upon the name of Konovalov; it instantly caught my attention, and this is what I read:

"Last night in cell 3 of the local jail, a man from Murom named Alexander Ivanovich Konovalov, aged 40, hanged himself from the damper-knob of the chimney. The suicide had been arrested in Pskov for vagrancy and was being returned to his native town. The prison authorities assert that he was a quiet, peaceable, contemplative man. His suicide, according to the report of the prison doctor, is to be attributed to melancholia."

As I read this brief notice, I felt that I could throw more light on the reasons which had induced this quiet contemplative man to put an end to his life. I knew him. Perhaps it was my duty to speak: he was a splendid person and one does not meet such people too often in this world.

... I was eighteen when I made the acquaintance of Konovalov. At that time I worked in a bakery as the baker's assistant. The baker was a soldier from the "music squad", a prodigious drinker who often spoiled the dough. When drunk he would play tunes on his lips or drum them out with his fingers on anything that came to hand. If the owner of the bakery flew at him for spoiling the bread or not having it ready by morning, he would become furious, would curse the owner roundly and try to make him realise it was a *musician* he was dealing with.

“Spoiled the dough!” he would shout, his long red moustache bristling, his thick wet lips slapping together loudly. “Burnt the crust! Soggy! To hell with you, you cross-eyed hyena! Do you think I was born for such work? To hell with you and your work! I’m a musician, I’ll have you know. It used to be if the viola got drunk, I played the viola; if the oboe was arrested, I played the oboe; if the cornet got sick, who took his place? Me! Tum-tarra-tum-tum! Bah, you miserable *katsap*! I’m quitting!”

And the owner, a puffy, flabby man with short fat legs, a womanish face, and eyes of different colours, would stamp his feet till his belly shook and shriek:

“You thief! You murderer! You Christ-selling Judas!” And he would raise his hands over his head with the stubby fingers spread wide apart and shriek even louder: “And what if I turn you over to the police as a rebel?”

“Me, the servant of the tsar and the country, turned over to the police?” the soldier would bawl back, and then he would advance slowly on the owner, brandishing his fists. The owner would back away snorting and spitting in rage; there was nothing else for him to do—good bakers were not to be found in that Volga town in summer.

Such scenes took place almost daily. The soldier drank, spoiled the dough, and played marches and waltzes—“numbers”, as he called them; the boss grit his teeth, while I, as a result of all this, had to do the work of two.

And so I was very glad when the following scene took place between the owner and the soldier:

“Well, soldier,” said the boss as he came into the bakery, his face beaming, a look of triumph

in his eyes, "Well, soldier, poke out your lips and sing a march."

"What's that?" said the soldier glumly from where he lay on the bin drunk as usual.

"Get ready to set out on a march," exulted the owner.

"Where to?" asked the soldier, dropping his legs over the edge of the bench and sensing that something was wrong.

"Wherever you like."

"What d'ye mean?" barked the soldier.

"I mean I'm not keeping you any longer. Take your pay and—forward, march! To the four corners of the earth."

The soldier, who was used to bullying the boss because he was sure he could not do without him, was sobered by this announcement; he knew only too well that it would be hard for one with his poor knowledge of the trade to find another job.

"Come now, you're fooling," he said anxiously, struggling to his feet.

"Get along, get along."

"Get along?"

"Clear out."

"Worked out, eh?" said the soldier, with a bitter shake of his head. "You've sucked my blood—sucked me dry—and now you throw me out. Slick of you, you spider."

"Me, a spider?" seethed the boss.

"Yes, you. A blood-sucking spider, that's what you are," said the soldier with conviction, and went staggering towards the door.

The boss gave a nasty laugh as he watched him go, and there was a gay sparkle in his eyes.

"Try and find somebody who'll take you on now! Nobody'll take you as a gift after what I've told them about you. Not a soul."

"Have you found a new baker?" I asked.

"The new one's an old one. He was my helper once. What a man! Worth his weight in gold. But he's a drunkard, too, tut-tut! Only he goes off on bouts. He'll work like an ox for three or four months; won't sleep or rest or give a hang for the pay. Just work and sing. And when he sings it goes straight to your heart. When he's had his fill of singing he'll go off on the booze."

The owner sighed and gave a hopeless wave of his hand.

"Wild horses can't stop him once he's started. He drinks till he's sick or stark naked. And then, maybe because he's ashamed, he slinks off somewhere like an evil spirit that's caught a whiff of incense. But here he is. Have you come for good, Sasha?"

"For good," came a deep rich voice from the door-way.

There with his shoulder against the jamb stood a tall broad-shouldered man of about thirty. His clothes were those of a typical tramp, his face that of a true Slav. He was wearing a red calico shirt that was torn and indescribably dirty, wide trousers of coarse linen, on one foot he had the remains of a rubber galosh, on the other a battered leather shoe. His fair hair was tousled and bits of straw were entangled in it. They were in his fair beard, too, which spread like a fan over his chest. His pale, worn, longish face was lighted by a pair of large blue eyes with a gentle look in them. His lips—fine, but lacking colour—smiled from underneath a blond moustache. His smile was such that he seemed to be saying apologetically:

"I'm just what I am; don't be too hard on me."

"Come in, Sasha, this is your helper," said the boss, rubbing his hands together as he gazed admiringly at the powerful physique of the new

baker, who advanced without a word and held out an enormous hand. We exchanged greetings. He sat down on a bench, stretched out his legs, stared at his feet, and said to the owner:

“Buy me two shirts, Vasily Semyonovich, and a pair of shoes. And some linen for a cap.”

“You’ll have everything, don’t worry. I’ve got caps, and I’ll bring the shirts and trousers this evening. Meanwhile, get to work; I know what a good fellow you are, and you’ll have no reason to complain of me. Nobody could treat Konovalov bad because he never treats anybody bad himself. I’ve got a heart, even if I am your boss. I used to work once myself, and I know horse-radish draws tears. Well, I’ll be leaving you, fellows.”

And he left us alone.

Konovalov sat there without a word, looking about him with a smile on his face.

The bakery was in a basement with a vaulted ceiling, and its three windows were below street level. There was little light and little air, but plenty of dirt, dampness, and flour dust. Three big bins stood against the wall, one of them empty, another with ready dough in it, the third with dough that was being leavened. Across each of them fell a pale shaft of light from the window. Sacks of flour lay on the dirty floor beside a stove that took up nearly one-third of the room; big logs burned furiously in the stove, and the reflection of the flames flickering on the grey walls gave the impression that they were noiselessly chattering together.

It was depressing to have that sooty vaulted ceiling hanging over our heads. The fusion of daylight with the light from the stove produced a vague illumination that tired the eyes. Dust and street-sounds came pouring in a steady stream through the windows. Konovalov took all this in,

heaved a sigh, and said in an expressionless voice:

“Been working here long?”

I told him. We both fell silent and gazed at each other from under bent brows.

“A regular prison,” he said. “Let’s go outside and sit on the bench by the gate, shall we?”

We did.

“A fellow can breathe out here. It’ll take me some time to get used to that hole. I’ve just come from the sea, so you can judge for yourself. Worked on the Caspian. And all of a sudden to find yourself slapped down into a hole in the ground!”

He gave me a rueful smile and stopped talking, gazing hard at the people walking and riding past. There was a sad light in his clear blue eyes. Evening fell; the street was noisy, stuffy, dusty; the shadows of the houses crept across the road. Konovalov sat leaning against the wall, his arms crossed on his chest, his fingers playing with his silky beard. I stole a glance at his pale oval face and thought: I wonder what he’s like? But I did not dare speak to him because he was my chief, and also because he inspired me with respect.

Three fine lines crossed his forehead, but from time to time they vanished, and I longed to know what this man was thinking about.

“Come along, it’s time. You mix the second batch and I’ll set the third.”

When we had weighed out one lot of dough and mixed another, we sat down for a glass of tea. Konovalov thrust his hand into his shirt and said to me:

“Can you read? Here, read this,” and he handed me a soiled and wrinkled piece of paper.

I read:

“Dear Sasha,

“Greeting and a kiss by mail. I’m lonely and unhappy and I can’t wait for the day when I’ll go off with you or begin living with you. I’m sick and tired of this rotten life, even if I did like it at first. You understand why, and I began to understand, too, after I met you. Please write to me soon, I want awfully to hear from you. Good-bye for the present but not farewell, dear bearded friend of my heart. I won’t scold you even if I am disappointed in you because you’re a pig. You went away without even saying good-bye to me, but even so I was always happy with you and I never was with anybody else and I’ll never forget it. Couldn’t you try to have me taken off the list, Sasha? The girls told you I’d throw you over if I was off the list but that’s all nonsense and an absolute lie. If you were only nice to me I’d be as faithful to you as a dog once I was off the list. You could do it easy but it’s hard for me. When you came to see me I cried because I have to live such a life but I didn’t tell you that was why.

“Good-bye,

“Your Capitolina.”

Konovalov took the letter from me and began to turn it absently in one hand while he twisted his beard with the other.

“Do you know how to write?”

“I do.”

“And have you any ink?”

“I have.”

“Then write her a letter, will you? She probably thinks I’m a rotter—that I’ve forgotten all about her. Do write.”

“I will, but who is she?”

“A prostitute. See, she’s asking me to have her taken off the list. That means I’ll have to promise the police to marry her; then they’ll give her back

her passport and take away her card and she'll be free, understand?"

In half an hour a touching missive was ready.

"Well, read it; how does it sound?" asked Konovalov impatiently.

This is how it sounded:

"Dear Capa,

"Don't think I'm low enough to have forgotten all about you. I didn't forget, but I went on a bout and drank up everything I had. But I'm working again, and tomorrow I'll get an advance from my boss and send it to Philip and he'll have you taken off the list. I'll send enough to pay your fare here. So long for the present.

"Yours,
"Alexander."

"Hm-m," said Konovalov, scratching his head, "not much of a writer, you aren't. No feeling in your letter, no tears. And besides, I asked you to bawl me out in strong language, and you haven't."

"Why should I?"

"To let her know I'm ashamed of myself and realise how bad I treated her. That's why. This is dry as split peas. Drop a tear or two."

There was nothing for it but to drop a tear or two, which I did effectively: Konovalov was satisfied. He put his hand on my shoulder and said enthusiastically:

"Now everything's fine. Thanks. I can see you're a good sort. You and I will get on together."

I had no doubt of this, and asked him to tell me about Capitolina.

"Capitolina? She's young—just a kid. From Vyatka. A merchant's daughter. She left the straight and narrow, and the further she went, the worse it got, and at last she landed in a brothel. When I first saw her I thought, God! how

could it have happened? She's just a baby. We got to be good friends. She'd cry. I'd say, 'Don't worry, have patience, I'll get you out of here, just wait a while.' And I got everything ready, money and everything, and then all of a sudden I went off on a bout and found myself in Astrakhan. And then here. A certain chap let her know where I was, and she wrote me that letter."

"What are you thinking of doing—marrying her?" I asked.

"Me get married? How can a drunk get married? Oh, no, I'll just have her taken off the list and then she'll be free to go wherever she likes. She'll find some place to fit into and maybe turn out to be a decent woman."

"She wants to live with you."

"She's just kidding. They're all like that, the women. I know them through and through; I've had lots of them. Even had a merchant's wife once. I was working as a groom in a circus when she laid eyes on me. 'Come and be our coachman,' she said. I was fed up with the circus, so I agreed. Well, one thing led to another. They had a big house, with horses and servants, and all the rest. Lived like lords. Her husband was short and fat, like our boss, but she was slim and graceful as a cat, and a hot little parcel. She'd hug me tight and kiss me on the mouth, and her kisses were like hot coals. Make you tremble all over, and scare the life out of you. There she'd be, kissing me and sobbing so hard that her shoulders shook. 'What's the matter, Vera?' I'd say. 'You're like a child, Sasha, you don't understand a thing,' she'd answer. She was a sweet little woman, and it's the truth what she said, I really don't understand anything. I'm a blockhead and I know it. I don't understand why I do what I do, and I never give a thought to how I live."

He stopped speaking and gazed at me with wide-open eyes filled with an expression that was half fear, half wonder—some sense of alarm that heightened the sadness of his handsome face, making it still handsomer.

“And how did your affair with the merchant’s wife end?” I asked.

“You see, every once in a while I feel so miserable I just can’t bear to go on living. It’s as if I was the only creature in the whole wide world, as if there wasn’t another living thing but me anywhere on earth. And at such times I hate everybody; myself and everyone else. I wouldn’t give a damn if everybody died. It must be some sickness in me. That’s what started me drinking. So I went to her and said, ‘Let me go, Vera Mikhailovna, I can’t stand it any longer.’ ‘Why, have you grown tired of me?’ she asks and gives an unpleasant laugh. ‘It’s not you I’ve grown tired of, it’s myself,’ I said. At first she didn’t understand and she began to shout and scold me. But when she came to understand, she just dropped her head and said, ‘Go along, then.’ And she cried. She had black eyes and her hair was black, too, and curly. She came from a family of clerks, not merchants. I felt sorry for her and hated myself. Of course it was hard for her to live with such a husband. He was like a sack of flour. She cried for a long time—she had got used to me by then. I was very tender to her: sometimes I’d take her up in my arms and rock her like a baby. She’d fall asleep and I’d sit and look at her. A person can look very pretty asleep—so sweet and simple; just breathes and smiles and nothing else. Sometimes we’d go for a drive, when we were living in the country in the summer. She liked to drive like the wind. When we’d get to the woods we’d tie the horse to a tree and lie down in the shade.

She'd make me put my head in her lap while she read a book to me. I'd listen until I fell asleep. They were good stories she read, very good. I'll never forget one of them about a mute named Gerasim and his dog. This mute was an outcast, nobody loved him but his dog. When people made fun of him, he'd go and seek comfort with his dog. A very sad story. He was a serf, this Gerasim, and one day his mistress says to him, 'Go and drown your dog, Gerasim, it's always howling.' So off he went. He took a boat, put the dog in it, and pushed off. I'd start shivering whenever she got to that place. God, think of making a man kill a creature that was his only happiness! What sort of a thing was that to do? A wonderful story, and true to life—that's what made it so good. There are people like that: some one thing is the whole world to them. This dog, for instance. Why the dog? Because nobody else loved him, but the dog did, and a man can't live without love of some kind—why else was he given a heart to love with? She read me lots of stories. A sweet little woman, and to this day I feel sorry for her. If it wasn't for the star I was born under, I wouldn't have left her until she asked me to, or until her husband found out about us. A loving soul, that's the main thing, and it wasn't the gifts she gave me that showed her lovingness; the very heart of her was loving. She kissed me and all the rest, like any other woman, but sometimes a great quietness would come over her, and then it was wonderful how good she was. She'd look straight into my very soul and talk to me like a mother, and I'd feel about five years old. And even so I left her. The misery. The misery kept dragging me off somewhere. 'Good-bye, Vera Mikhailovna, and forgive me,' I said. 'Good-bye, Sasha,' she said and then, the crazy woman, she pulled my

sleeve up and sank her teeth into my flesh. I almost cried out. She nearly bit a chunk out of my arm—it took three weeks to heal. I still wear the marks."

He bared his muscular arm, white and well formed, and held it out with a sad and kindly smile. The scar was plainly to be seen near the elbow joint—two semi-circles with their ends almost meeting. The smiling Konovalov shook his head as he looked at them.

"The crazy woman. That's what she gave me to remember her by."

I had heard such stories before. Almost every tramp will tell you about some "merchant's wife" or "gentlewoman" with whom he has had an affair. And with everyone the gentlewoman or merchant's wife has assumed so many aspects in the countless tales told about her that she has become a fantastic personality, and one comprising the most contradictory aspects of body and soul. If today she is gay, quick-tempered and blue-eyed, next week she will be kindly, sentimental and black-eyed. Usually the tale is recounted cynically, with innumerable details intended to humiliate the woman.

But I detected a note of truthfulness in Konovalov's account, which contained elements I had never heard before, such as the reading of books and the comparing of himself, a strong and powerful man, to a child.

I imagined this slip of a woman sleeping in his arms, her head resting on his broad chest. There was something beautiful in the picture, and this helped to convince me of its truth. And in the end, there was the sad and gentle tone—a very special tone—in which he gave his reminiscences of the "merchant's wife". A true tramp never

speaks of women or anything else in such a tone; on the contrary, he boasts that there is nothing on earth he holds sacred.

"Why don't you say something? Do you think I'm lying?" asked Konovalov, and there was anxiety in his voice. He was sitting on a sack of flour holding a glass of tea in one hand and slowly stroking his beard with the other. His blue eyes bored into me inquiringly and the lines on his forehead were very marked.

"It's all the truth. Why should I lie? Oh, I know we roughs like to spin yarns. And why shouldn't we? If a fellow's never known anything worth while in life, why shouldn't he make up a fairy-tale and give it out as the truth? It don't do anybody any harm. He comes to believe it himself as he tells it—as if it really did happen that way. Believes it, and—well, it makes him feel good. Lots of people keep going that way. Can't be helped. But what I told you's the honest truth—that's exactly what happened. Is there anything strange about it? Here's woman who's not getting any joy out of life. What if I am only the coachman? It makes no difference to a woman—coachmen, gentlemen, officers—we're all the male sex. And all pigs in her eyes—all after the same thing and each of us trying to get it as cheap as possible. The simpler the man, the more conscience he's got, and I'm the simplest of the simple. Women always see that in me—they see I'll never do them harm and never laugh at them. When a woman sins, there's nothing she fears so much as being laughed at, being made sport of. A woman has more sense of shame than we have. When we've had our fun, we're ready to brag about it even in the market-place: you ought to see what a fool of a skirt I caught last night. But a woman can't brag. Nobody thinks she's clever for sinning.

The very lowest of them has more sense of shame than we have."

As I listened, I thought: strange sentiments coming from a man like him; can he mean them?

I grew even more astonished as he went on talking, gazing at me with his clear child-like eyes.

The wood in the stove burnt out, leaving a heap of bright coals that cast a rosy glow on the wall of the bakery.

The window framed a square of blue sky set with two stars. One of them, very large, had an emerald sparkle; the other, quite close to it, was very faint.

In a week's time Konovalov and I had become fast friends.

"You're a simple sort, and that's what I like," he said with a wide grin, slapping me on the back with an enormous hand.

He was an artist at his job. You should have seen him tossing the seven-pood lump of dough about as he rolled it, or bending over the bin to knead it, his arms buried to the elbow in the resiliency mass which gave off a thin squeak as he pressed it in steel fingers.

I scarcely had time to empty a form on to his long-handled tray before he had thrust it into the oven. At first I was afraid he would place the loaves too close together in his haste, but when he had baked three batches and not one of the hundred and twenty loaves (all well browned and light as a feather) had "collapsed", I realised he was a master-workman. He loved his work, took it to heart, became fretful if the oven did not heat or the dough was slow in rising, scolded the boss whenever he bought flour of a poor grade, and took a child-like joy and satisfaction in having

the loaves turn out perfectly round and fluffy, baked to a turn, with a crisp crust. Sometimes he would take the most perfect loaf off the tray and say laughingly, as he tossed it, steaming, from hand to hand:

“Just see what a pretty thing we’ve made, you and me!”

It was a pleasure for me to watch this overgrown boy at work, he put so much spirit into it—a thing everyone should do, no matter what his job.

One day I said to him:

“Sasha, they say you can sing.”

“I can. But I don’t sing any old time, I sing in spells, so to speak. I start when I get the misery. Or if I begin singing first, the misery’s sure to follow. But don’t talk about it, and don’t tease me. What about you, don’t you sing? Oh, you do! Well, don’t start till I get round to it. Then we’ll sing together, shall we?”

I agreed to wait, and would whistle whenever I felt an urge to sing. But sometimes I would forget and begin to hum to myself as I kneaded or rolled the dough. Konovalov would listen, his lips moving, and then reminded me of my promise. Occasionally he shouted at me roughly:

“Shut up! Stop wailing!”

One day I took a book out of my box and sat at the window to read.

Konovalov was dozing on a bin, but the rustle of the paper above his head as I turned the pages made him open his eyes.

“What’s your book about?”

It was *The Podlipovites*.

“Read it to me, will you?” he asked.

Sitting there on the window-sill I began to read out loud, and he sat up and put his head against my knee as he listened. From time to time I

glanced over the book and met his eyes, and to this day they are impressed on my memory—wide-open, full of tense, concentrated attention. His mouth, too, was open, showing two rows of even white teeth. It was an inspiration to see his uplifted eyebrows, the broken lines furrowing his high forehead, the hands gripping his knees, his whole form, so still and attentive. It made me try to put as much expression as possible into my reading of the sad tale of Pila and Sysoika.

At last I grew tired and closed the book.

"Is that all?" asked Konovalov in a whisper.

"Less than half."

"Will you read it all to me?"

"If you want me to."

"Ah!" he said, taking his head in his hands and swaying from side to side. There was something he wanted to say and he opened and shut his mouth, puffing like a pair of bellows, and narrowing his eyes. I had not expected the reading to have such an effect on him and did not understand what it meant.

"How you read that!" he whispered. "In different voices, each person as if he was alive. Aproska. Pila. What fools they were! Very comical. What comes next? Where will they go? Jesus, why, it's all *true*, they're real people, honest-to-goodness muzhiks, with true-to-life voices and faces and all the rest. Listen, Maxim, when we've put the bread in the oven, let's read some more."

We put the bread in the oven, got ready another batch, and then I read for another hour and a half. When the bread was ready we stopped again, took it out, put other loaves in, kneaded fresh dough and mixed some yeast. All this we did in feverish haste and almost without speaking. From time to time the frowning Konovalov would

snap out monosyllabic instructions to me as he rushed ahead with the work.

It was morning when we finished the book, and my tongue was stiff and sore.

Konovalov was sitting on a sack of flour and looking at me without a word, a strange expression in his eyes, his hands gripping his knees.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

He nodded, screwing up his eyes, and when he spoke it was in a whisper again.

"Who wrote it?" His eyes were full of a wonder not to be expressed in words, and suddenly his face was lighted by an upsurge of strong feeling.

I told him who had written the book.

"What a man! He caught it just right, didn't he? It almost makes you afraid. Makes the shivers run up and down your spine, it's so true to life. What about him—that writer-fellow—what did he get for doing it?"

"That is...?"

"Didn't they give him something—a prize or something?"

"Why should they give him a prize?" I asked.

"Well, a book—it's like a police proclamation: people read it and begin talking about it. About what Pila and Sysoika were like, for instance. Nobody could help feeling sorry for them, living in such darkness. A dog's life. And so...."

"And so what?"

Konovalov glanced at me self-consciously.

"There ought to be some measures taken," he said meekly. "They're human beings. Somebody ought to help them."

I made a long speech in reply, but alas! it did not make the impression I hoped it would.

Konovalov grew thoughtful, dropped his head, sighed, and rocked back and forth, but not once

did he interrupt me. I grew tired at last and stopped.

He raised his head and looked at me sadly.

"So they didn't give him a thing?" he said.

"Who?" I asked, having quite forgotten about the author.

"That writer-fellow."

I did not answer, annoyed because he evidently considered himself incapable of grappling with philosophical problems.

Konovalov took up the book, turned it reverently in his hands, opened it, shut it, put it down, and gave a sigh.

"What a deep thing!" he said in a low voice. "Here's a man writes a book... nothing but paper with little marks on it... writes it, and... is this man dead?"

"Yes," I said.

"He's dead, but his book is here and people read it. A person looks at it with his eyes and pronounces different words. And another person listens and finds out that there once lived people named Pila, Sysoika and Aproska. And he feels sorry for them, even though he never set eyes on them and they're just—just nothing to him. Maybe he passes dozens of live people like them on the street every day without knowing anything about them, and it makes no difference to him—he doesn't even notice them. But when he meets them in a book his heart fairly bursts with pity for them. How do you explain that?... So that writer-fellow died without any reward, did he? Just nothing at all?"

I grew angry and told him how writers were rewarded.

Konovalov looked at me with frightened eyes and clicked his tongue to show his sympathy.

"A fine state of affairs," he sighed, then hung

his head and chewed the left end of his moustache.

I began to speak about the fatal role of the pub in the life of Russian men of letters, I told him about the truly great and profound writers who have been ruined by vodka, to which they turned as their only comfort in a life full of hardship.

“Do such people drink?” asked Konovalov in an awed whisper. In his wide eyes I read distrust of what I had said, and fear and pity for those men. “Do they really drink? I suppose it’s after they write their books that they take to drink, isn’t it?”

Not finding much point to this question, I ignored it.

“After, of course,” decided Konovalov. “These writer-fellows are like sponges that suck up other people’s sorrow. They have a special kind of eyes for this. And hearts, too. If they look at life for a long time it gives them the misery. And they pour it out into their books. But that don’t help, because their hearts are touched, and you can’t even burn out the misery, once it’s in your heart. So there’s only one thing left—to drown it out in vodka. That’s why they drink. Am I right?”

I said he was, and this seemed to encourage him.

“But to be fair,” he went on, delving deeper into the psychology of a writer, “they ought to be rewarded? Because they understand more than other people and point out to others what is wrong with life. Take me, for instance—what am I? A tramp, a drunkard, a good-for-nothing. There’s no sense in a life like mine. What’s the point of my living in this world? Who needs me, when you come to it? No wife, no children, no place to call my own, and not even any hankering after them. I just live on in my misery, nobody knows why.

There's nothing inside me to point the way. How shall I put it? No spark in my soul—no strength, perhaps. Whatever you call it, it's just not there, and that's that. So I go on living and searching for that something, and longing for it, but what it is, I don't know."

He looked at me, his head resting on his hand, his face reflecting the thoughts striving to take shape in his mind.

"Well?" I urged.

"Well—I don't know how to put it, but I think if one of those writer-fellows came along and had a look at me, he might be able to explain my life, mightn't he? What do you think?"

I thought that I myself could do this, and instantly undertook to give what I thought a very clear and simple explanation. I spoke about circumstances and environment, about inequality, about those who were the lords of life, and those who were its victims.

Konovalov listened attentively. He was sitting opposite me, his cheek in his hand, and gradually a veil seemed to be drawn over his big blue eyes that were wide-open and bespoke a thoughtful nature; the lines in his forehead deepened, and he scarcely seemed to breathe, so intense was his effort to grasp what I was saying.

This flattered me. With great fervour I drew a picture of his life for him, arguing that he was not to blame for what he was. He was a victim of circumstances, a person who, equal to all others by nature, had been made a social nonentity by a chain of injustices stretching far back in history. I finished by saying:

"You have nothing to blame yourself for. You have been wronged."

He said nothing, just sat there with his eyes fixed on me. I could see a bright smile forming in

their depths, and I waited impatiently to hear what he would say.

With a soft laugh he leaned toward me and put his hand on my shoulder in a soft feminine gesture.

"How easy you explain it, pal. Where did you get all that? Out of books? You've certainly read a lot. If only I'd read that much! But the main thing is, you feel sorry for people. I've never heard anyone talk like that before. A strange thing—most people blame others for the wrongs they suffer, but you blame the whole of life, the whole system. According to you, a man isn't to blame for anything himself; if he was born to be a tramp, a tramp he'll be. And what you say about convicts is very queer: they steal because they have no work and have to get food somehow. Very generous you are. You've got a damned soft heart."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you agree with me? Do you think what I said is right or not?"

"You should know better than me whether it's right or not. You can read. If you take other folks, I guess you're right, but if you take me. . . ."

"Well?"

"I'm a special case. Who's to blame for me being a drunkard? My brother Pavel don't drink. He's got his own bakery in Perm. I'm a better workman than he is, yet I'm a tramp and a drunkard, and there's nothing you can say for me. Yet we were both born of the same mother. He's even younger than I am. So you see there must be something wrong with me myself. I must have been born wrong. You say all people are equal. But I'm a special case. And not only me—there are lots of others like me. We're special people—don't fit into any picture. And we need special judgement. And special laws—hard laws, to drive

us off the earth, because we don't do anybody any good; we only take up room and stand in other people's way. Who's to blame for that? We ourselves are to blame. Because we have no love of life, nor even of ourselves."

This enormous man with eyes as clear as a baby's despatched with himself so lightly, branded himself as worthless and therefore to be driven off the earth with such a heartrending smile, that I was dumbfounded. Never before had I found the quality of self-abnegation in a tramp, most of whom are by their very natures isolated from everything about them, hostile to everything, and only too eager to make everything the target of sneering spitefulness. The people I had met thus far were always blaming others, always lodging complaints, stubbornly closing their eyes to the undeniable evidence contradicting their claims to impeccability. They invariably attributed their failures to the cruelty of fate or the wickedness of others. Konovalov did not blame fate or accuse others. He alone was to blame for the mess his life had become, and the harder I tried to prove to him that he was "a victim of circumstances and environment", the stronger he insisted that he alone was to blame for his state. This was an original approach, but it infuriated me. He found pleasure in chastising himself; it was pleasure that gleamed in his eyes as he cried out in his resounding voice:

"Every man is his own master, and nobody but me is responsible if I am a rascal!"

I would not have been surprised to hear a cultivated person say such a thing, for all sorts of diseases affect that elaborate psychic organism known as "an intellectual". But it was strange to hear it coming from the lips of this rough, albeit he was an intellectual among those wronged,

hungry, naked, resentful half-men and half-beasts who are to be found in the festering slums of our cities. There was nothing for it but to conclude that Konovalov was indeed "a special case", but I did not wish to.

In outward appearance he was, down to the slightest detail, a typical tramp, but the better I got to know him, the more convinced I became that here was a type at variance with what I believed tramps to be: a group that might almost be considered a class; uncommonly vigorous as well as vicious, and by no means stupid.

Our argument waxed hotter.

"Listen," I cried, "how can a man stand on his feet when all sorts of dark forces are pressing him down on all sides?"

"Let him hold on tighter," said my opponent vehemently, his eyes flashing.

"Hold on to what?"

"Let him find something and hold on to it."

"Why don't you?"

"You funny duck! Didn't I tell you I myself was to blame? I haven't found anything to hold on to. I keep looking for it and longing for it, but I can't find it."

But it was time to think of the bread, and we set to work, still trying to prove to each other the correctness of our points of view. Of course we proved nothing, and when our work was over, we lay down, tired and overwrought.

Konovalov flung himself on the floor and was soon asleep. I lay on some sacks of flour, from which vantage point I looked down upon his powerful bearded form, stretched like a storied hero on some bast matting near one of the bins. There was a smell of hot bread, sour dough and burning logs in the room. Gradually it grew light, and a grey sky glanced through the flour-dusted

window-panes. A cart squeaked past and a cowherd blew his horn to gather the herd.

Konovalov snored. As I watched the rise and fall of his massive chest I tried to think of a quick means of converting him to my creed, but I dozed off before I had succeeded.

In the morning we got up, mixed the yeast, washed ourselves, and sat down on a bench to drink tea.

"Have you got any other books?" asked Konovalov.

"Yes."

"Will you read them to me?"

"All right."

"Good. Look here, I'll go on working for a month, get my pay from the boss and give you half."

"What for?"

"To buy books. Buy whatever you like for yourself, and buy me—maybe two. Books about muzhiks. People like Pila and Sysoika. But see they're written with feeling, not cold and empty. Some books are just rubbish. Take that "Panfilka and Filatka"—trash, even if it has got a picture on the front. Or about the Poshekhontsy and other fairy-tales. I don't like such stuff. I never knew there were books like the one you read me."

"Would you like me to read to you about Stenka Razin?"

"Stenka? Is it good?"

"Very."

"Let's have it."

And so I began reading him Kostomarov's *Stenka Razin's Uprising*. At first this talented monograph, almost an epic poem, was not to the taste of my bearded listener.

"Why isn't there any talk in it?" he asked, glancing into the book. While I was explaining

he tried to hide a yawn. This made him feel ashamed, and he said guiltily:

“Go ahead and read. Don’t mind me.”

But as, with the skill of an artist, the historian drew the portrait of Stepan Razin, and this “prince of the Volga freemen” rose imposingly from the pages of the book, Konovalov underwent a transformation. Hitherto bored, indifferent and heavy-eyed, he gradually and without my noticing it appeared before me in an astonishing new aspect. From where he sat on the bin opposite me, his arms encircling his knees, his chin on his knees so that his beard flowed down over his legs, he devoured me with burning eyes that looked out from under drawn brows. There was not a sign of that childlike naïveté that I found so surprising in him, and all the simplicity, the feminine gentleness that went so well with his kindly blue eyes—now dark and slit-like—had disappeared. There was something flaming, something leonine, in his body, which had become a bundle of taut muscles. I stopped reading.

“Go on,” he said quietly but firmly.

“What’s the matter?”

“Go on!” he repeated, and his request was tinged with irritation.

I went on, and I could see as I glanced up at him from time to time that he was growing more and more excited. He emanated something—a sort of hot vapour—that stimulated, even intoxicated me. At last I came to the place where Stenka is captured.

“So they caught him!” cried Konovalov.

The cry was full of pain, wrath, resentment.

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and his eyes were strangely dilated. He jumped up off the bin and stood in front of me, tall and trembling.

“Wait. Stop reading,” he said quickly, putting

his hand on my shoulder. "Tell me what will happen next. No, don't tell me. Will they kill him? Read on, Maxim, quickly."

One might have thought that Konovalov and not Frolka was Razin's brother. It seemed that there were blood ties undissolved by the passage of three hundred years binding this tramp of Stenka. With all the force of his strong and vigorous body, with all the passion of a soul yearning for "something to hold on to", he was experiencing the pain and wrath the freedom-loving rebel had known on being captured three centuries before.

"Go on reading, for Christ's sake!"

I read on, deeply agitated, conscious of the beating of my own heart, sharing with Konovalov the pain that Stenka suffered. Soon we came to the place where he is tortured.

Konovalov set his jaws and his blue eyes flashed fire. He leaned over my shoulder, keeping his eyes glued to the page. His breath was loud in my ear and it blew my hair into my eyes. I tossed it back. Seeing this, Konovalov laid a heavy palm on my head.

"Then Razin clenched his teeth so hard that they fell out, and he spat them out with the blood on the floor...."

"Stop! To hell with it!" cried Konovalov, and he snatched the book out of my hands and threw it on the floor with all his might, he himself sinking down beside it.

He cried, and since he was ashamed to cry, he growled to disguise the sobs. He hid his head between his knees and cried, wiping his eyes on his dirty cotton trousers.

I sat on the bench in front of him, unable to find words of comfort.

"Maxim!" said Konovalov from where he sat on the floor. "Think of it! Pila... Sysoika... and

now Stenka. What an end. Think of spitting your teeth out like that!"

A shudder passed over him.

He was especially shocked by Stenka's spitting out his teeth, and kept coming back to it, giving nervous little jerks of his shoulders as he mentioned it.

Our heads reeled under the impression of the brutal picture of human torture that had been presented to us.

"Read it to me again, will you?" coaxed Konovalov, picking up the book and handing it to me. "Here, show me where that place about the teeth is."

I pointed it out to him and he fixed his eyes on the lines.

"Is that really what's written: he spat out his teeth with the blood? The letters here are just like all the others. God! how it must have hurt him, eh? Even his teeth. And what will come later? Will they kill him? Thank God they'll kill him in the end!"

His joy was expressed with intense feeling, with a look of supreme satisfaction in his eyes, and I shuddered at the contemplation of a compassion so ardently desiring the death of the tortured Stenka.

We lived in a daze for the rest of the day, speaking only of Stenka, recalling the events of his life, the songs written about him, the tortures he underwent. Twice Konovalov began singing one of these songs in his rich baritone, but both times he broke off in the middle.

From that day he and I were even closer friends.

I read *Stenka Razin's Uprising*, *Taras Bulba* and *Poor People* to him several times. My listener was

greatly impressed by *Taras Bulba*, but it could not eclipse the deep impression made on him by Kostomarov's book. He could not understand Makar Devushkin and Varya. He found the language of Makar's letters ridiculous, and was sceptical in his attitude towards Varya.

"Just see how she makes up to that old man! Sly of her—making up to a scarecrow like him. But stop wasting time on that junk, Maxim. What's there in it? Him writes to her, her writes to him—nothing but a waste of paper. To hell with them. Nothing funny, nothing sad in it; what's it written for?"

I said they resembled the Podlipovites but he disagreed

"Pila and Sysoika—that's different. They're real people, living and suffering. But what are these? All they do is write letters. Boring. They're not even live people—just made up. Take Taras and Stenka—God, if they ever got together, wouldn't they do things! They'd put new life into Pila and Sysoika!"

He had a muddled conception of time and supposed that all his favourite characters were contemporaries, two of them living in Usolye, one in the Ukraine, the fourth on the Volga. I had difficulty in convincing him that if Sysoika and Pila had sailed down the Volga they would not have found Stenka, and if Stenka had ever crossed the Don steppe and reached the Ukraine, he would not have found Bulba there.

Konovalov was disappointed on learning the truth. I told him something about the Pugachev uprising, anxious to see what he would think of Pugachev. Konovalov would have none of him.

"A dirty swindler, that's what he was. Hid behind the tsar's name to stir up the people. How many good men died because of him! Stenka? He

was different. That Pugachev was a skunk and nothing more. Got any more books like the one about Stenka? Look and see. But drop that idiot of a Makar, he's not interesting. I'd rather hear you read how they killed Stenka again."

On our days off Konovalov and I would go to the meadows across the river. We would take some vodka and bread and a book, and set out in the morning for "our airing", as Konovalov called it.

We were especially fond of going to the "glass works". That, for some inexplicable reason, was the name given to a building standing in an open field not far from the town. It was brick, three-storeyed, with a caved-in roof, broken windows, and a cellar filled with foul-smelling water all summer long. Ramshackled, grey-green, with a run-to-seed look, it stood there in the field gazing at the town out of the dark sockets of its shattered windows, for all the world like a dying cripple who has been banished from town. Year after year the spring floods reached it, but it remained standing mouldy from top to bottom, surrounded by pools of water that protected it from frequent visits by the police. Despite its caved-in roof, it offered shelter to all sorts of dubious vagabonds.

There were always lots of them there. Ragged, half-starved, shrinking from sunlight, they lived like owls among the ruins. Konovalov and I were always welcome guests, because on leaving the bakery we would each take a loaf of white bread and buy a half-pint of vodka and a hawker's trayful of "stew"—liver, lungs, heart and tripe. For only two or three rubles we provided the "glass-folk", as Konovalov called them, with a fine meal.

In exchange for our treat they would tell us

stories in which the horrible soul-stirring truth was fantastically interwoven with the most obvious falsehood. Each story was a bit of black lace (the truth), stitched with bright colours (the lies). This lace twisted itself about heart and brain, strangling them in its harsh, diverse patterns. The "glass folk" grew attached to us in their way. I often read to them, and they usually listened with thoughtful attention.

I was struck by the profound knowledge of life shown by these people whom life had thrown overboard, and I eagerly listened to their stories. Konovalov listened, too, but only so that he could contradict their philosophical views and draw me into an argument.

When one of these creatures, dressed fit to kill, and with a physiognomy suggesting that one would do well to keep one's distance, told the story of his life and ruin (which invariably became a speech in self-defence and self-justification) Konovalov would smile musingly and shake his head. They noticed this.

"Don't you believe me, Sasha?" the one who had told the story would demand.

"Of course, I believe you. You've got to believe what a man says. Even if you know he's lying, believe him; listen to him and try to find out what makes him lie. Sometimes a man's lies show you what he is, better than the truth. And what are our lives like, when you get down to it? Just plain muck. So we dress them up by telling lies. Am I right?"

"You're right," his interlocutor would agree. "But why did you shake your head?"

"Because you don't look at things right. You talk as if it wasn't you yourself who made you what you are, but the first bloke who came along. Why did you let him? Why didn't you put up a

fight? We're always complaining about other people, but we're men, too, aren't we? And so we can be complained of, too. If somebody's always getting in our way, we're probably getting in somebody else's way, isn't that so? How can you explain that?"

"Life ought to be made over so that there would be plenty of room for everybody and nobody would get in anybody else's way," they answered.

"Who's to make it over?" he demanded challengingly, and hastened to answer before anyone else could, "We are. We ourselves. But how are we to make it over if we don't know how? If we can't make anything worth while out of our *own* lives? It turns out we have no one to turn to but ourselves, and as for ourselves—well, we all know what *we* are."

They objected and tried to find excuses for themselves, but he stubbornly stuck to his point: each man is responsible for what he is and nobody else is to be blamed for his failure.

It was quite impossible to budge him from this position, and just as impossible to accept his view of people. On the one hand, they were, in his opinion, fully capable of remaking life so that all should enjoy freedom, and on the other, they were a weak, spineless lot, incapable of doing anything but complain of each other.

Often these arguments, begun at noon, ended at midnight, and Konovalov and I would return from the "glass-folk" in pitch darkness and up to our knees in mud.

Once we were nearly sucked down into a bog; another time we got caught in a police raid and spent the night in the station along with some twenty of our pals from the "glass-works" who had roused the suspicion of the police. Sometimes we had no desire to philosophise, and then

the two of us would walk far out over the meadows on the other side of the river until we came to some small lakes teeming with little fish deposited there by the spring floods. For the sole purpose of enhancing the beauty of the scene we would build a fire in the bushes lining the shore of one of these lakes and then read or talk about life. Sometimes Konovalov would say whimsically:

“Maxim, let’s just look at the sky.”

And we would lie on our backs and gaze into the fathomless blue vault above us. At first we were conscious of the rustling of the leaves and the rippling of the water and felt the ground beneath us. But slowly the blue sky seemed to draw us up into it, we lost all sense of existence, and, as if taking off from the earth, floated out in the heavenly expanses in a state of drowsy contemplation which we feared to disturb by word or movement.

Thus would we lie for hours at a time, and would return to work with new strength, physically and spiritually refreshed.

Konovalov loved nature with a profound, inarticulate love, and whenever he was in the fields or on the river he would fall into a serene and gentle mood which increased his resemblance to a child. Occasionally he would say with a deep sigh, as he gazed at the sky:

“Ah, this is the thing!”

And there was more thought and feeling in this single exclamation than in the effusions of many poets, especially those who are inspired rather by the desire to be looked upon as people of exquisite sensibilities, than by true adoration of the beauties of nature. Poetry, like everything else, loses its sacred simplicity when it is made a profession.

Thus, day by day, two months passed. Konovalov and I did a great deal of talking and a great deal of reading. I read him *Stenka Razin's Uprising* so often that he could tell the story in his own words, page by page, from beginning to end. It became for him what a delightful fairy-tale is to an impressionable child. He named the objects used in his work after different characters in the book, and once when a bowl fell off the shelf and broke, he exclaimed angrily:

“Damn you, Captain Prozorovsky!”

If the dough was slow in rising he called it “Frolka”; the yeast was “Stenka’s thoughts”; while Stenka himself was synonymous for everything great and exceptional, though ill-starred and doomed to failure.

During all that time Capitolina, whose letter I had read and answered on the day I first met Konovalov, was almost never mentioned.

Konovalov sent her money through a certain Philip, asking him to speak to the police about her, but no reply came from either Philip or the girl.

And then suddenly one evening when we were getting the dough ready to put into the oven, the bakery door was opened and from the darkness of the damp passage came a girl’s deep voice:

“I beg your pardon.”

The tone was at once timid and bantering.

“Who do you want?” I asked.

Konovalov let one end of the tray fall on the floor and began to pull at his beard disconcertedly.

“Does baker Konovalov work here?”

Now she was standing in the doorway, and the light from the hanging lamp fell full on her head, which was swathed in a white woollen shawl. She had a round and pretty face with uptilted

nose and round cheeks that dimpled when her full red lips parted in a smile.

"He does," I answered.

"He does, he does!" broke in Konovalov joyfully, throwing down the other end of the tray and taking long strides to reach her.

"Sasha!" she gasped.

They threw their arms about each other, Konovalov bending almost double.

"How are you? When did you get here? Just think! Are you free? Good! See, what did I tell you? Now you've got a clear path ahead. Walk straight down it and don't be afraid of anything," said Konovalov impetuously, still standing in the doorway and keeping his arms about her shoulders and waist.

"You carry on alone today, Maxim, while I look after the lady. Where are you planning to stay, Capa?"

"Here, with you."

"Here? You can't stay here. We bake bread here, and besides—well, you just can't stay here. Our boss is very strict. We'll have to fix you up for the night somewhere else. Maybe in a hotel. Come along."

And out they went. I stayed behind to do the baking and did not expect Konovalov back until morning, but to my great surprise he turned up in three hours. My surprise increased when, on glancing into his face, I found him looking tired and dejected instead of beaming with happiness as I thought he should be.

"What's the matter?" I asked, wondering what could have thrown my friend into a mood so out of keeping with the circumstances.

"Nothing," he answered gloomily, and after a moment's silence he spat fiercely.

"But, after all . . ." I insisted.

"What's it to you?" he said wearily, lying down on the bench. "'After all, after all ... After all she's a skirt."

It took a great deal of effort on my part to wring an explanation from him, but at last he gave it to me in approximately the following words:

"A skirt, I tell you. And if I wasn't such a damn fool all this would never have happened, understand? You keep saying women are human beings, too. Of course they walk about on their hind legs, they don't chew grass, they know how to talk and laugh, but still they're not our kind. Why? I don't know. I just know they're not, that's all. Take this Capitolina now, here's her line: 'I want to live with you,' she says, 'like your wife. I want to follow you around like your dog.' Did you ever hear anything so crazy? 'Come now, sweetheart,' I says, 'you're talking nonsense. Judge for yourself—how could you ever live with me? First of all, I'm a drunk. Secondly, I haven't got a roof over my head. Thirdly, I'm a tramp and can't live in one place a long time . . .' and so on, giving lots of reasons. But she says, 'To hell with your being a drunkard, all workmen are drunkards, but they have wives just the same; as for a roof over your head, once you have a wife you'll have a roof, and then you won't want to go roaming any more.' 'No, Capa,' I says, 'I can't see it your way because I know I'm not fit for that sort of life and I never will be.' But she says, 'Then I'll throw myself into the river.' 'You little fool!' I says, and then she lams into me: 'You swine, you crock, deceiving me like this, you long-legged louse!' she says, and goes on and on until I'm ready to run away. Then she begins to cry. Cries and keeps blaming me: 'Why did you have them set me free if you didn't want me? Why

did you have me leave that place,' she says, 'and what am I to do with myself now, you blasted fool?' ... Well, what am I to do with her?"

"But why *did* you have her come here?" I asked.

"Why? You're a queer egg! Because I felt sorry for her. Anybody'd feel sorry for a person he saw sinking in the mud. But as for tying myself up and all that—not on your life! I'll never agree to a thing like that. What kind of a family man am I? If *that* was the thing I wanted to hold on to, I'd have got married long ago. What chances I've had! With a dowry and everything. But how can I do such a thing if it's beyond my power? She cries all the time, and that, of course, is too bad. But what am I to do? I just can't."

He shook his head in confirmation of his mournful "I just can't", got up off the bench and, rumpling his beard with both hands, began pacing the floor of the bakery with lowered head, spitting out his disgust from time to time.

"Maxim!" he said, and there was supplication and embarrassment in his tone. "Maybe you'll go and tell her how things stand, eh? That's a good boy."

"What shall I tell her?"

"Tell her the whole truth. Say I can't do it; it's just not in me. Or else say—say I've got some bad disease."

"But that's not true," I laughed.

"No, but it's a good excuse, isn't it? Damn it all, what a mess! What in the world would I ever do with a wife?"

He threw up his hands in a gesture of such blank despair that it was clear he had no use for a wife. And though the way he put the story was comical, its dramatic side made me wonder what would happen to the girl. He kept walking up and down and talking as if to himself:

"And I don't like her any more—not the least bit. She keeps pulling at me, sucking me down like a bog. Thinks she's found herself a husband. Humph! She's not very clever, but she's sly."

It was no doubt the vagabond instinct asserting itself, the irrepressible love of freedom that seemed to be under threat.

"But I'm not to be caught with such poor bait! I'm a big fish, I am," he boasted. "I'll show her; and ... and ... why shouldn't I?" He stopped in the middle of the room and fell to thinking, a smile playing over his lips. As I watched his face, suddenly very animated, I tried to guess what he had decided to do.

"Maxim! Let's hit it for the Kuban!"

This was unexpected. I had been fostering certain literary-educational plans in regard to him. I hoped to teach him to read and write and to pass on to him all the knowledge I had so far accumulated. He had promised to remain here for the summer, a thing which would have facilitated my task, and now...?

"You're talking nonsense," I said, put out.

"Then what am I to do?" he ejaculated.

I tried to tell him Capitolina's intentions were not as serious as he seemed to think, and that he must wait and see what would happen.

As it turned out, we had not long to wait.

We were sitting on the floor in front of the oven, our backs to the window. It was nearly midnight, an hour and a half or so since Konovalov had come back. All of a sudden there was a sound of shattering glass and a fair-sized cobble-stone came rolling across the floor. We both jumped up in fright and ran to the window.

"Missed!" a woman's voice whined. "A bad aim. O-o-o, if only...."

"C'mon," roared a deep bass voice. "C'mon, I'll see to him later."

Through the broken window came hysterical drunken laughter, the laughter of desperation, so thin and high that it set one's teeth on edge.

"It's her," said Konovalov miserably.

I could see nothing but two legs dangling down into the window excavation. There they hung, swinging, the heels striking against the brick wall as if seeking a foothold.

"C'mon," muttered the man.

"Let go! Stop pulling me! Let me have my say! Good-bye, Sasha! Good-bye—" and what followed would not bear printing.

I moved closer to the window so that I could see Capitolina. She was bending down holding on to the window frame, trying to see inside the bakery, and her loosened hair had fallen over her breast and shoulders. Her white shawl had slipped off her head and the neck of her dress was ripped open. Capitolina was drunk. She swayed from side to side, hiccuping, swearing, shrieking hysterically, trembling, her clothes torn, her face flushed and wet with tears.

A tall man was bending over her.

"C'mon!" he kept shouting, one hand on her shoulder, the other on the wall of the house.

"Sasha! You've been my ruin, remember that! God damn you, you red-headed devil! I wish to God you'd never been born. I counted on you, and you spit in my face. All right, we'll settle accounts yet! Hiding from me, are you? Ashamed of yourself, you pig-faced monster! Sasha... lovey...."

"I'm not hiding from anybody," said Konovalov in a husky voice as he kneeled on the bench in front of the window. "I'm not hiding. And you shouldn't say such things. I wanted to help you. I thought good would come of what I did, but you wanted something I just couldn't do."

"Sasha! Could you kill me?"

"Why did you get drunk? Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

"Sasha! Sasha! Drown me!"

"Drop it! C'mon!" said the man's voice.

"You rotter! Why did you have to pretend to be decent?"

"What's the row about? Who are these people?"

The night watchman's whistle interrupted the talk, drowned it out, then broke off.

"Why did I ever trust you, you devil?" sobbed the girl at the window.

Suddenly her legs were drawn up and disappeared in the darkness. Blurred voices and the sounds of a struggle could be heard.

"Don't take me to the police-station! Sa-a-a-sha!" cried the girl desperately.

Heavy steps rang out on the pavement.

Whistles, muted grunts and cries.

"Sa-a-a-sha! Sasha . . . dearie."

It was as if someone were being brutally tortured. All of this receded into the night, grew faint, fainter, and at last vanished like a bad dream.

Konovalov and I were so stunned by what had happened that we went on staring into the darkness, haunted by the memory of the cries, sobs, oaths, groans, and the shouts of the police. As I recalled certain of the sounds, I could not make myself believe all this had really happened—too swiftly had this brief but intense drama been enacted.

"The end," said Konovalov tersely and simply as he listened once more into the silence of the dark night which gazed with such calm severity through the window.

"The things she said to me!" he went on after

a pause, still kneeling on the bench with his arms on the window-sill. "So she's been caught by the police. Drunk. And with that sot. It didn't take her long to make up her mind." He gave a deep sigh, got off the bench, sat on a sack of flour, took his head in his hands and rocked from side to side.

"Tell me this, Maxim: how did it come about?" he said under his breath. "And what part did I play in this affair?"

I told him. I said that first of all a person ought to know what he wanted and ought to be able to foresee what a step would lead to before he took it. He had not known and had not seen, and so he was to blame for what had happened. I was furious with him. That drunken "C'mon" and the cries and groans of Capitolina still rang in my ears, and I showed my friend no mercy.

He heard me out with lowered head. When I had finished, he looked up, and I saw that he was shocked and frightened.

"How do you like that!" he ejaculated. "What'll happen next? How must I act? What am I to do with her?"

There was such child-like regret and perplexed helplessness in his admission of guilt that I instantly felt sorry for him and was sorry I had spoken so harshly.

"Why did I ever interfere?" he asked repentantly. "God, she must hate me! I'll go to the police-station and try to get her out. I'll see her and ... do what I can. I'll tell her ... something or other. Shall I go?"

I said I didn't think anything would come of their seeing each other. What could he tell her? Besides, she was drunk and probably sleeping by then.

But he was set on going.

"I'll go, all the same. After all, I *do* want to help her. Those people there don't give a damn for her. I'll go. You tend to things here. I'll be right back."

He pulled on his cap and went out, forgetting to put on the worn-out shoes that were his pride.

I did my work and went to sleep, and when I woke up in the morning and glanced, as usual, into the corner where Konovalov slept, he was not there.

It was evening when he put in an appearance—sullen, unkempt, with deep lines in his forehead and a shadow darkening his blue eyes. Without looking at me, he went over to the bins, inspected what I had done, and lay down on the floor without a word.

"Did you see her?" I asked.

"That's what I went for, isn't it?"

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing."

Clearly he did not wish to talk. I did not pry him with questions, sure that the mood would pass. All the next day his conversation was limited to the brief words required by our work; he went about with his eyes on the ground and his glance shadowed as it had been when he came back. Some light inside him seemed to have gone out. He worked slowly and half-heartedly, weighed down by his thoughts. That night, when we had put the last batch of bread into the oven and were afraid to lie down for fear it would burn, he said to me:

"Read something from 'Stenka'."

I began to read the description of Stenka's torture and execution, since this was the passage that roused his emotions more than any other. He lay stretched out on his back on the floor, gazing without blinking at the soot-covered ceiling arches.

"So that's how they did away with a man," said Konovalov slowly. "But even so it was easier to live then Freer. At least there was something you could do. Nowadays everything's quiet and peaceful—very peaceful if you look at it from the outside. Books and learning and all that. But a man lives without anyone to stand by him and no one to look after him. It's forbidden to do wrong, but it's impossible not to. And so there's order outside, but a fine mix-up inside. And nobody can understand anybody else."

"How are things with you and Capitolina?" I asked.

"What?" he replied, shaking himself. "With Capa? All off," and he gave a resolute wave of his hand.

"So you cut the strings?"

"Not me. She did it herself."

"How?"

"Very simply. Stuck to her point and wouldn't have it any other way. So she's right back to where she was. Only she used not to drink, and now she does. You take out the bread, I'm going to sleep."

The bakery grew quiet. The lamp smoked, from time to time there was a crackling sound in the flue, and the crust of the baked loaves standing on the shelves crackled, too. The night watchmen stood talking outside our window, and another sound drifted in from time to time—perhaps it was the creaking of our sign, perhaps it was someone groaning.

I took out the bread and lay down, but I could not go to sleep, just lay there listening to the night sounds with half-closed eyes. Suddenly I saw Konovalov get up without a sound, go over to the shelf, take Kostomarov's book, open it, and hold it to his eyes. I could clearly see his

thoughtful face, I watched him move his finger down the printed lines, shake his head, turn the page, study it closely, and then glance at me. There was something strange, something very intense and searching in his drawn face; for a long time he looked at me, and I had never seen him wear such a look before.

Unable to restrain my curiosity, I asked him what he was doing.

"I thought you were asleep," he said with some embarrassment. Then he came over, book in hand, sat down beside me, and said haltingly, "Look, this is what I wanted to ask you. Isn't there some book that gives rules of living? That teaches you how to act? What I'd like to know is—what's wrong to do and what's... what's right. It makes me sick, the things I do. They start out good, but they end up bad. Take this business with Capa." He drew a deep breath and then said imploringly, "Please try to find such a book and read it to me."

He paused.

"Maxim."

"What?"

"The things Capitolina said to me!"

"What of it? Forget it."

"Of course it don't make any difference now. But tell me, had she a right to?"

That was a ticklish question, but after a moment's consideration I said she had.

"I think so, too. She did have a right to," said Konovalov gloomily, and became silent.

He tossed about on the bast mat on the floor; several times he got up, lit a cigarette, sat down at the window, then lay on the floor again.

At last I fell asleep, and when I woke up he was gone. He came back in the evening. It was as though he were covered with a thick layer of

dust, and there was a frozen expression in his hazy eyes. Tossing his cap on the shelf, he heaved a sigh and sat down next to me.

“Where have you been?”

“To see Capa.”

“Well?”

“It’s all over, pal. Just as I said.”

“There’s nothing to be done with people like her,” I said in an attempt to cheer him, adding a few words about the force of habit and whatever else seemed to fit the situation. Konovalov sat staring at the floor and said not a word until I finished.

“Oh no, you’re wrong. That’s not the root of the matter. It’s just that I’m like a disease. I wasn’t meant to live in this world. I give off poison. As soon as anybody comes close to me, he gets poisoned. There’s nothing I can bring anybody but grief. When you stop to think of it, who have I ever brought happiness? Not a soul. And I’ve known lots of people in my life. There’s something rotten about me.”

“Nonsense.”

“It’s the truth,” he said with a nod of conviction.

I tried to prove he was wrong, but whatever I said only convinced him more firmly that he was not fit to live in this world.

A quick and radical change took place in him. He became languid, abstracted, taciturn, unsociable; he lost interest in books and no longer worked with his former zeal.

In leisure hours he would lie on the floor and gaze steadily up at the vaulted ceiling. His cheeks grew sunken and his eyes lost their clear child-like lustre.

“What’s the matter, Sasha?” I asked.

"A bout's beginning," he explained. "Soon I'll start guzzling vodka. My insides smart as if they'd been seared. The time's come. If it hadn't been for Capa I might have held out longer. I can't get her off my mind. How can it be—here I thought I was doing a person good, and it turns out just the opposite. We need rules on how to act, pal. Would it really be so hard to make them, those rules, so that all people would act the same and understand each other? How can people be expected to live with such a big space separating them from one another? Haven't they the brains to know they've got to bring order into life, and see that everybody knows what's what? God!"

He was so absorbed in thoughts about the necessity of bringing order into life that he paid no attention to what I said. I noticed that he avoided me. One day, on hearing me expound my ideas on the remaking of life for the hundredth time, he flared up.

"Shut up. I've heard all that before. It isn't life that's to blame, but people. People are the main thing, understand? And that's all there is to it. According to what you say, people ought to stay just as they are until things are changed. Oh no, first change *people*, show them how to act; then everything will be clear and they won't get in each other's way. That's what we've got to do for people. Teach them to get in the right lane."

When I objected, he lost his temper or became glum.

"Oh, leave me alone," he would say.

Once he went away in the evening and did not come back to work that night or the next day. Instead, the boss came and said anxiously:

"Sasha's on a bout. He's sitting in 'The Wall'. We'll have to find another baker."

"Maybe he'll come out of it?"

"Not a chance, I know him."

I went to "The Wall", a pub artfully wedged into the stone wall that gave it its name. Its distinguishing characteristic was that it boasted not a single window, the light falling through an opening in the roof. As a matter of fact it was nothing but a square hole in the ground covered by shingles. It smelled of earth, makhorka, and vodka, and was always crowded with suspicious-looking characters. For days on end they would lounge there, waiting for one of the workmen to go on a spree so that they could drink the shirt off his back.

Konovalov was sitting at a big table in the middle of the pub surrounded by six gentlemen in rags and tatters and with faces that might have belonged to characters from one of Hoffmann's tales. They were listening to him with fawning attention as they drank beer and vodka and ate something that looked like lumps of clay.

"Drink, mates, drink as much as you like. I've got money and clothes. Enough to last us three days. We'll drink it all away and—to hell! I don't want to work here any more, and I don't want to live here any more either."

"A rotten town," put in someone who looked like John Falstaff.

"Work?" queried another, gazing at the ceiling and adding in a tone of wonder, "Is that what a man was born for?"

And they all began to gabble at once, proving to Konovalov that he had a perfect right to drink, and that he was even *obliged* to drink, since it was with them he was drinking.

"Ho, Maxim, full of steam," he jingled on catching sight of me. "Come, you bookworm, you hypocrite—have a swig. I've jumped the rails

for good, pal. To hell! I want to get soaked to the roots of my hair. I'll stop when there's nothing left but hair. Come on, join in."

He was not yet completely drunk. His blue eyes flashed with excitement and the handsome beard covering his chest like a silken fan quivered from the nervous trembling of his lower jaw. The collar of his shirt was open, tiny drops of sweat glistened on his white brow, and the hand with which he held out a glass of beer to me was shaking.

"Drop it, Sasha, let's get out of here," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Drop it?" he laughed. "If you had said that ten years ago, I might have dropped it. But not now. What else am I to do? I'm aware of everything, every single thing, the least little movement, but I don't understand a thing and I don't know what I ought to do. I'm aware of everything, I tell you, and so I drink, because there's nothing else for me to do. Here, have a drink!"

His companions eyed me with obvious displeasure, all twelve eyes measuring me hostilely from head to foot.

The poor creatures were afraid I would take Konovalov away and deprive them of the treat they had been waiting for.

"This is my pal, mates, a learned fellow, God damn him. Maxim, could you read about Stenka here? What books there are, brothers! Or about Pila. How about it, Maxim? Blood and tears, brothers. That Pila—he was me, wasn't he, Maxim? And so was Sysoika. Honest to God. There's your explanation for you!"

He looked at me with wide-open eyes charged with fear, and his lower jaw trembled queerly. His companions reluctantly made a place for me

at the table. I sat down next to Konovalov just as he picked up a glass filled with beer and vodka, half and half.

His one idea seemed to be to deaden himself with this mixture as quickly as possible. When he had swallowed it, he took up a piece of what looked like clay but really was boiled meat, stared at it a moment, then tossed it against the wall of the pub.

His companions let out a low growl, like a pack of hungry wolves.

"I'm a lost soul. Why did my mother ever bring me into this world? Nobody knows. Dark. Crowded. Farewell, Maxim, if you don't want to have a drink with me. I'm not going back to the bakery. The boss owes me some money. Collect and bring it here. I'll drink it. Or no, take it and buy yourself books. Will you? Don't want to? Please yourself. Or maybe you will? You're a pig if you don't. Get away from me. Get away, I tell you!"

As he got drunk his eyes took on a hostile glitter.

His companions were quite ready to throw me out by the scruff of the neck, so I left before they had a chance.

Three hours later I was back in "The Wall". Konovalov's companions had increased by two. All of them were drunk—he less than the others. He was singing, his elbows on the table, his eyes fixed on the sky glimpsed through the hole in the ceiling. The drunkards had assumed various poses as they listened to him, and some of them were hiccuping.

Konovalov had a baritone voice and took his high notes in a falsetto, as do all workmen when they sing. With deep feeling he poured out his mournful roulades, cheek in hand, eyes half

closed, Adam's apple protruding. His face was pale with emotion. Eight blank inebriate physiognomies were turned to him, and the only sounds that came from them were occasional mutterings or hiccups. Konovalov's voice sobbed, moaned, vibrated tenderly. It was enough to break one's heart to hear that fine fellow singing so mournfully.

The stifling odours, the drunken sweaty faces, the two smoking oil lamps, the dirty soot-blackened walls, the earthen floor, the gloomy shadows—all of this was unwholesome and depressing. It was as if a gruesome feast were being held by men buried alive in some catacomb, and as if one of them were singing for the last time before he died, saying farewell to the sky. My friend's song was filled with hopeless sorrow, calm despair, and disconsolate longing.

"Maxim here? Want to be my lieutenant?" he interrupted his singing to say, holding out his hand to me. "I've got everything ready, pal. Collected a band—here are my men—and we'll find some more. Oh, yes we will. That won't be hard. And we'll invite Pila and Sysoika; feed them with meat and porridge every day, won't we? Is it a go? Bring some books with you. You'll read to us about Stenka and others. Oh, pal, I'm sick of it all! Sick—of—it—all!"

He brought his fist downward on the table. The bottles and glasses clattered and his companions, instantly sitting up, filled the pub with a dreadful clamour.

"Drink, fellows!" shouted Konovalov. "Drink away your troubles! Swill it down!"

I went out and lingered in the entrance listening to Konovalov's drunken raving, and when he began to sing again I went back to the bakery, pursued by the sounds of the drunken song, which

groaned and sobbed for long in the silence of the night.

Two days later Konovalov disappeared.

One has to be born into cultivated society to be able to live in it all one's life without longing to escape from the oppressive conventions and small insidious lies sanctioned by custom. From the conceit, sectarianism, hypocrisy of that society; in a word, from a vanity of vanities that dulls the senses and corrupts the mind. I was born and reared outside of it, and thanks to this favourable circumstance I am unable to take big doses of civilisation without feeling the necessity of breaking out of its bounds from time to time and finding relief from its over-complexity and unwholesome refinement.

Village life is almost as sad and insufferable as life among the intelligentsia. The best thing to do at such times is to go among the city slums, where, in spite of the dirt, life is very simple and sincere. Or to strike out down the roads and across the fields of your native land—an adventure that is greatly refreshing and demands no resources but a pair of sturdy legs.

Five years ago I set out on such an adventure, and my wanderings over holy Russia brought me at last to Pheodosia. At that time the construction of the breakwater had just begun, and I turned my steps in that direction in the hope of earning a little money.

I wished first to contemplate the building site as one might a picture, and so I climbed a hill and gazed down on the mighty sea stretching as far as the eye reached, and on the minute creatures that were trying to harness it.

It was a vast picture of human labour that I

beheld. The whole rocky shore was dug up, pitted, covered with piles of stone and brush, with barrows, logs, iron bars, pile-drivers, mechanical appliances, and in and out of all this scurried the workmen. One of the hills had been blown up with dynamite, and now the men were chopping it up with picks to clear the way for a railway line. Cement was being mixed in huge containers and moulded into six-foot blocks that were lowered into the sea to form a bulwark against the titanic force of the tide. The people looked as small as maggots against the background of the brown hill mauled by them, and like maggots they wriggled in the scorching heat of this southern sun, among the heaps of crushed rock and piles of timber seen dimly through clouds of stone-dust. The chaos about them and the white-hot sky above them suggested that they were digging themselves into the hill, seeking shelter in its bowels from the heat of the sun and the desolation all around.

The oppressive air was filled with the hum and throb of work: the ring of picks against stone, the squeaking of barrow-wheels, the dull thud of falling pile-drivers, the wail of the workers' song "Dubinushka", the chip-chop of the axes barking the logs, and the many-toned cries of the drab human forms animating the scene.

In one place workmen were grunting loudly as they tried to push away a great piece of rock; in another they were lifting an enormous log, shouting in unison:

"One, two—heave!"

The gashed hillside gave back a blurred echo of their cries.

Along the broken segments of a board walk moved a slow procession of men bent double over barrows loaded with stones, while from the

opposite direction came a procession with empty barrows, moving even more slowly, that they might stretch one moment's rest out to two. A motley crowd stood about the pile-driver, and from their midst came a tenor voice singing:

*Ekh, mates, it's hellish hot,
Ekh, mates, it's a hellish lot!
O-i-i-i, du-u-binushka,
One, two, and heave!*

A low roar came from the men pulling on the rope, the metal cylinder slid quickly to the top of the shaft, then fell with a dull thud, sending a shudder through the pile-driver.

Little grey people were swarming all over the ground between the hill and the sea, filling the air with dust, cries, and the sourish smell of sweat. Among them moved their bosses in white duck coats with brass buttons that flashed in the sunlight like cold yellow eyes.

The sea stretched calmly to the misty horizon and its transparent waves broke quietly on the seething shore. As it sparkled in the sunlight it seemed to be smiling the condescending smile of a Gulliver who knows that with a single movement he can destroy the fruits of the labour of these Lilliputs if he so desires.

There it lay, glittering blindingly—vast and strong and kindly, sending forth a cooling breath to refresh the exhausted people labouring to curb the freedom of its waves, which were now lapping the mutilated shore so meekly. It seemed to feel sorry for these people. In the course of the centuries it had learned that those who labour are not the ones who harbour evil designs against it; they are mere slaves, assigned the role of battling with the elements, and in this battle the elements are sure to wreak vengeance upon them.

They do nothing but labour, they are for ever building something, their sweat and blood is the cement of all structures on our earth; yet they themselves get nothing for this, even though all their strength is poured into the eternal aspiration to build, an aspiration which has wrought miracles on earth, but has not given men roofs over their heads or enough food for their bodies. These men themselves are one of the elements, and that is why the sea looks kindly rather than wrathfully upon their unprofitable labour. Those little grey maggots boring into the hillside were as the drops of water which the sea hurls against the cold implacable cliffs in its eternal aspiration to enlarge its bounds. It is they which are the first to perish from the impact. The sum of these drops is something akin to the sea, is in no way different from it—just as powerful, just as given to destruction when touched by the breath of the storm. In ancient times the sea had knowledge of the slaves who built the pyramids in the desert, and of the slaves of Xerxes, that ridiculous ruler who gave the sea three hundred lashes as punishment for washing away his toy-like bridges. Slaves have been the same at all times, they have always been subordinate, they have always been ill fed, they have always done great and miraculous tasks, sometimes deifying those who drove them to work, more often cursing them, occasionally rising in revolt against their rulers.

... Quietly the waves ran up on the shore where all these people were building a stone barrier against their constant movement, and as they ran they sang a tender song about the past, about all they had seen, century after century, on the shores of this land.

Among the workmen were lean bronzed figures in red turbans or fezzes, in short blue jackets,

and in baggy trousers drawn in tight at the knee. These, as I learned later, were Turks from Anatolia. Their guttural speech mingled with the slow long-drawn speech of Russians from Vyatka, with the terse, quick phrases of Volga-men and the soft inflexions of Ukrainians.

There was famine in Russia, and the famine had driven people here from almost all the stricken regions. They formed little groups of countrymen, while the cosmopolitan tramps with their independent bearing and peculiarities of dress and speech were easily distinguished from those who still had roots in native soil, who had not forgotten the land and had only left it for a while, under stress of hunger. Tramps were to be found in every group—mingling as easily with men from Vyatka as with Ukrainians, and everywhere making themselves at home. But most of them had gathered round the pile-driver, since it was easier to work there than with picks or barrows.

When I came up to them the workmen were standing with the rope hanging loose in their hands, waiting for the foreman to free the pulley from some hemp which was "jamming" it. He fussed about in the little wooden tower, calling down from time to time:

"Give it a jerk."

And they would jerk the rope half-heartedly.

"Stop! Jerk it again. Stop! Come on now!"

The soloist—an unshaven youth with a pock-marked face and soldierly bearing—squared his shoulders, glanced off to one side, cleared his throat, and began:

The driver pounds her into the ground...

The lines which followed could not have been passed by the most lenient of censors. They had evidently been made up on the spur of the mo-

ment by the singer himself and called forth a loud guffaw, to which their author responded by twisting his moustache in the manner of a performer who is used to applause.

"Nothing else to do?" shouted down the foreman furiously. "Braying like the asses you are!"

"You'll burst a blood vessel, Mitrich!" replied one of the workmen.

The voice was familiar and I seemed to have seen that tall broad-shouldered frame, that oval face and those blue eyes somewhere before. Could it be Konovalov? But Konovalov had not had the scar that cleaved this chap's forehead from his left temple to the bridge of his nose. And Konovalov's hair had been lighter and less curly. And Konovalov had had a handsome beard, while this young man had a clean-shaven chin and a long moustache with trailing ends such as Ukrainians wear. But even so there was something strikingly familiar about him. I decided to ask him where I should go to apply for a job, but I waited until the pile was driven in.

"A-a-umph! A-a-a-umph!" grunted the workmen as they squatted, pulling hard on the rope, then leaped into the air as if taking wing. The pile-driver squeaked and shook; hairy brown arms stretched up to the ropes over the heads of the people, biceps stood out in great knots, yet the forty-pood iron hammer kept falling shorter and shorter of maximum height and its blows on the pile grew weaker and weaker. Any-one watching the scene might have thought these men were idol-worshippers, who, in ecstasy and despair, were lifting their arms and bowing before their silent god. The air was filled with hot vapours that rose from their dirty sweaty faces with dishevelled hair plastered to wet foreheads, from their brown necks and shoulders twitching

with strain, from their bodies that were only half clad in rags of every description. And these bodies merged to form a solid mass of muscles that writhed in the humid air throbbing with the heat of the south, saturated with the smell of sweat.

"Time's up!" someone shouted in a hoarse rough voice.

The workmen's hands relaxed and the ropes fell limply about the pile-driver. The men slumped down on to the ground, wiping the sweat from their faces, taking deep breaths of air, easing their backs, feeling their shoulders and filling the air with a low mutter like the growl of an angry beast.

"Friend," said I to the man in question.

He turned to me slowly, let his eyes slide over my face, then narrowed them and gazed at me fixedly.

"Konovalov!"

"Wait." He tipped back my head as if about to lay hands on my throat, then suddenly a joyful smile lighted his face.

"Maxim! Think of that now! Old pal! So you've cut the traces, too, have you? Joined us tramps? Good for you. When did you do it? Where have you come from? You and I'll roam all over the earth together. That was no life for us, that other life. Nothing but misery and a lot of trouble. A sure way to rot to death. I've been on the road ever since I left you. The places I've seen! The air I've breathed! But look at you, the way you've got yourself up. I'd never have known you. Clothes of a soldier, face of a student. Well, how do you like living like this, from place to place? Don't think I've forgotten about Stenka—or Taras or Pila—I remember them all."

He punched me in the ribs and clapped me on the shoulder. Unable to get a word in edgewise,

I just stood and smiled and looked into his kindly face, now radiant with the joy of this reunion. I, too, was glad to see him, extremely glad. I was reminded of how I had made my start in life, and the start was unquestionably better than what followed.

In the end I managed to ask my old friend how he had come by the scar on his forehead and the light curls on his head.

"Oh, those? This is how. Two of my pals and I thought we'd cross the Rumanian border—wanted to see what things were like in Rumania. We set out from Kagul—a place in Bessarabia at the very border. We're making our way—at night, of course—very quietly, and all of a sudden 'Halt!' The customs guards. We'd run straight into them. We took to our heels, and one of those soldier-boys caught me on the head. Not much of a tap, it wasn't, but it kept me in hospital for a month. And just think, the soldier turned out to be from my own town! One of our boys from Murom! He was put in hospital, too, soon after that—a smuggler knifed him in the belly. When we were feeling better we put two and two together. 'Am I the one smashed your cap for you?' that soldier asks me. 'Must've been you, once you admit it,' I says. 'You're right, must've been me,' he says, 'but don't hold it against me. That's my job. We thought you were hauling contraband. See, I got it, too—they slit my belly open for me. Can't be helped. Life's nothing to sneeze at.' He and I became great friends—a fine fellow he was; Yashka Mazin. As for the curls—the curls came from typhoid. I had typhoid. They put me in jail in Kishinev for trying to slip across the border, and there I caught a fine case of typhoid. It kept me on my back so long I thought

I'd never get up. And I probably never would have if one of the nurses hadn't taken such good care of me. It's a miracle how I ever pulled through. She watched over me as if I was a baby. I don't know why. I meant nothing to her. 'Drop it, Maria Petrovna,' I'd say. 'I'm ashamed to have you making such a fuss over me.' But she'd just laugh at me. She had a kind heart. Sometimes she'd read me something for the salvation of my soul. 'Couldn't you find something—something different to read?' I asked her once. So she brought a book about an English sailor who got shipwrecked on a desert island and set up housekeeping there. There's an interesting book for you! I was mad on that book; wanted like hell to join him on that island. What a life! The island, the sea, the sky, and you all by yourself, with everything you need, free as a bird! He found a savage to live with him. I'd have drowned the savage, what the hell would I need him for? I'd have got on fine all by myself. Did you ever read that book?"

"But tell me how you got out of jail."

"They let me out. Held a trial, found me not guilty and let me out. Very simple. But look, I'm not going to work any more today, what the hell! I've got enough blisters on my hands. And I've got three rubles, and I'll get another forty kopeks for this morning. Not bad, eh? So you come and spend the day with us—we don't live in the barracks but on a hill not far from here. Found a hole very suitable to live in. Another fellow and I share it, but he's sick—got the fever. Wait here while I run to the foreman, it won't take me a minute."

He got up quickly and walked away just as the workmen picked up the ropes of the pile-driver to start work again. I went on sitting there watch-

ing the noisy movement all about me and the calm blue-green sea.

The tall form of Konovalov darted in and out among the people, the barrows, the piles of stone and logs. On he went, swinging his arms, clad in a blue cotton shirt that was too short and tight for him, in coarse linen trousers and heavy boots. Now and again he would look back and sign to me with his hands. I found him different, very strong and lively and filled with calm confidence in himself. Work was in full swing all about him: logs were being split and stones crushed; the barrows creaked drearily, clouds of dust rose into the air, something crashed to earth, people grunted, shouted, swore, and sang in moaning tones.

The handsome form of my friend retreating with such a firm step stood out in sharp contrast to this turmoil of sound and movement and suggested an answer to the enigma of Konovalov.

Two hours later he and I were lying in the "hole very suitable to live in". And very suitable it was. At some former time rock had been hewn from the hillside, leaving a large square cave in which four people could live comfortably. But it was very low, and a big boulder hung down over the entrance, so that the only way to get in was to crawl in on one's stomach. It was seven feet deep, but there was no need to go inside, and indeed it would have been dangerous to do so, for the boulder might have crashed down and buried us alive. For fear of this we disposed ourselves in the following way: we thrust our legs and bodies into the hole, which was very cool, and kept our heads outside, so that if the boulder should fall it would merely crush our skulls.

The ailing tramp had crawled out into the sun and was lying close enough for us to hear his teeth chatter whenever he was seized by a chill.

He was a long lanky Ukrainian from Poltava, as he told me dreamily.

He rolled on the ground in his efforts to wrap himself up in a grey garment made mostly of holes; he swore very picturesquely when his efforts proved in vain, but did not abandon either his efforts or his swearing. He had little black eyes that were always narrowed as if he were constantly scrutinising something.

The sun beat down mercilessly on the backs of our heads. Konovalov took my army coat and made a sort of tent by stretching it over some sticks that he stuck in the ground.

From the distance came the sound of the work going on in the bay, but we could not see it. On the shore to our right stood lumpish white houses constituting the town; to our left and in front of us was the sea receding far, far into the distance where wondrously delicate colours, soothing the eye and the spirit by the elusive beauty of their shades, merged in the soft half-tones of a fantastic mirage.

As Konovalov watched the sea, a blissful smile spread over his face, and he said to me:

"When the sun goes down we'll make a fire and get tea; we have some bread and meat. Want some watermelon?"

He rolled a watermelon out of the hole with his foot, took a knife out of his pocket and said, as he cut up the melon:

"Every time I find myself by the sea I wonder why so few people settle here. They'd be the better for it because the sea's so—so gentle. It makes you think good thoughts. Well, tell me what you've been doing the last few years."

I began to tell him. In the distance the sea had already become tinged with crimson and gold, and pink and mauve clouds rose to meet the

sun. It was as if mountains with snow-capped peaks flushed by the rays of the setting sun were emerging out of the sea.

"Too bad you've been living in towns, Maxim," said Konovalov very definitely when I had given my account. "What draws you to them? A stuffy life. No air, no space, nothing a man needs. People? There are people everywhere. Books? Enough of reading books! Is that what you were born for? Books are the bunk. Buy yourself one if you must, put it in your sack, and set out. Want to go to Tashkent with me? Or to Samarkand, or some other place? We'll stay there a while and then head for the Amur. I've decided to go everywhere—that's the only thing to do. Then you'll always see something new. And won't waste your time thinking. Just walk ahead with the wind in your face blowing all sorts of dirt out of your soul. Free and light-hearted. No one to boss you. If you're hungry, call a halt and do a fifty-kopek job, or if there's no job, beg a crust of bread—you'll always get it. At least you'll see something of the world. Some of its beauty. Want to join me?"

The sun slipped below the horizon. The clouds grew darker, as did the sea, and the air became cool. Here and there a star came out, the hum of work ceased in the bay, but from time to time we heard the sound of voices, soft as a sigh. And the wind wafted to our ears the melancholy murmur of the waves washing the beach.

Quickly the darkness deepened and the form of the Ukrainian, which had been very distinct five minutes earlier, was now only a vague mass.

"What about a fire?" he said with a cough.
"I'll make it."

Konovalov produced a heap of shavings and set a match to them. Thin tongues of flame began

to lick the yellow resinous wood. A ribbon of smoke wound up into the night air, which was cool and damp from the sea. It grew more and more quiet, as if life were withdrawing from us, its sounds fading in the darkness. The clouds dispersed, the stars shone brightly in the dark blue sky, and on the velvety surface of the sea appeared the lights of fishing boats and the reflection of the stars. The fire in front of us blossomed forth like a huge red-and-yellow flower. When Konovalov had hung the tea-kettle over it, he clasped his knees in his hands and gazed contemplatively into the flames. The Ukrainian crawled nearer, like a huge lizard.

"People build towns and houses, they huddle together in crowds, foul the land, suffocate, get in each other's way. A hell of a life! This is the only life—the one we're leading."

"H'm-m," said the Ukrainian with a shake of his head. "If you threw in a sheepskin and a warm house for the winter, then you might say we live like lords." He narrowed one eye on Konovalov and gave a little laugh.

"Y-e-s," admitted Konovalov, "winter's a deuce of a time. Towns really are needed in the winter, no denying that. But even so there's no excuse for having big towns. Why live in herds when it's hard enough for even two or three people to get along together? That's what I mean. When you come to think of it, there's really no place fit for a man to live in—not the town or the steppe or anywhere else. But it's better not to think about such things—can't do anything about it, just put yourself in a bad humour."

I had been under the impression that Konovalov's vagabond life had changed him, that the air of freedom he had been breathing for the last few years had enabled him to shed those

barnacles of misery that had clung to his heart; but from the tone in which he said this I realised he was still the man I had known, the man "searching for something to hang on to". His powerful body, unfortunately born with too sensitive a heart in it, was still being destroyed by the corrosion of bewilderment, the poison of pondering life. There are many such "contemplative" people in Russia, and they are always more unhappy than anybody else, because the burden of their thoughts is made heavier by the ignorance of their minds. I gazed with compassion at my friend and he, as if in confirmation of my conclusion, exclaimed unhappily:

"I often think about how we lived together, you and me, Maxim, and about—about everything that happened then. How many places I've been to since, and how many things I've seen! And yet there's no place on this earth where I fit in. I just can't find a place for myself."

"That's what you get for being born with a neck no yoke will fit," said the Ukrainian unfeelingly as he took the boiling kettle off the fire.

"Tell me why I can't settle down?" returned Konovalov. "Why is it that most people live normal enough, tend to business, have wives and children and all the rest, and are always anxious to do something or other? And I can't. I just can't. Why can't I?"

"The way you whine!" exclaimed the Ukrainian in surprise. "As if whining ever made things easier!"

"You're right," said Konovalov cheerlessly.

"I'm sparing of words, but I always know what to say," said the Stoic with a sense of his own worth as he went on fighting the fever.

He coughed, shifted his position, and spat furiously into the fire. Everything around us was

blotted out, hidden by thick curtains of darkness. The sky, too, was dark, for the moon had not yet risen. We sensed the sea rather than saw it, so intense was the darkness. It was as if a black fog had settled down over the earth. The fire went out.

“Let’s turn in,” suggested the Ukrainian.

We crawled into the “hole”, keeping our heads outside. We did not speak. Konovalov lay without stirring, as if he had turned to stone. The Ukrainian tossed from side to side and his teeth chattered. For a long time I kept my eyes fixed on the glow of the dying fire; at first the coals were large and bright, then they grew smaller and became coated with ash, which finally extinguished them. Soon there was nothing left of the fire but its warm breath. I watched it and thought:

“Each of us is like that. But oh! to burn brightly for the moment!”

Three days later I took my leave of Konovalov. I went on to the Kuban; he did not wish to join me. We parted certain we would meet again.

We never did.

FOR WANT OF SOMETHING BETTER TO DO

The passenger train, like an enormous serpent belching forth clouds of dense grey smoke, was swallowed up in the boundless steppe, in a yellow sea of wheat. As the smoke dissolved in the torrid air, so did the irate burst of noise that for a few moments violated the impassive silence of that vast and empty plain, in the middle of which stood a tiny railway station whose loneliness evoked the most mournful sentiments.

And when the noise of the train which, if raucous, was at least alive, had died away, the same oppressive silence enveloped the station.

The steppe was golden yellow, the sky sapphire blue. And both of them were illimitable. Amid such vastness the little brown station buildings gave the impression of being chance brush-strokes spoiling the melancholy picture executed painstakingly by an artist with no imagination.

Every day at twelve o'clock at noon and at four o'clock in the afternoon trains came out of the steppe and stood at the station for exactly two minutes. These four minutes represented the main, and indeed the only diversion at the station, for they alone brought new impressions to the people employed there.

In every train were all kinds of people in all kinds of clothes. They were to be seen but for an instant: a fleeting picture of tired, impatient, indifferent faces at carriage windows—and then a bell, a whistle, and they were noisily whisked away into the steppe, into the distance, into cities where life seethed and bustled.

The station employees gazed at these faces with curiosity, and when the train was gone they told each other their impressions. All around them stretched the silent steppe, above them arched the impassive sky, and in their hearts brooded envy of these people who sped to unknown destinations every day, leaving them imprisoned in the wilderness, beyond the pale of life, so to speak.

Here they are standing on the platform, watching the black ribbon of a departing train disappear in the golden sea of wheat. And so absorbed are they in their impressions of this momentary glimpse of life, that they are silent.

Nearly everyone is here: the stationmaster, a stout, genial, fair-haired man with the untrimmed whiskers of a Cossack; his assistant, a red-headed young fellow with a goatee; Luka, the station guard, small and quick and cunning; and one of the switchmen named Gomozov, a quiet, stocky fellow with a thick beard.

The wife of the stationmaster is sitting on a bench beside the station door. She is small and fat and suffers greatly from the heat. A baby is sleeping in her lap, and the baby's face is as round and red as its mother's.

The train goes down an incline and disappears as if swallowed up by the earth.

The stationmaster turns to his wife.

"Is the samovar ready, Sonya?"

"Of course," she replies in a soft and languid voice.

"Luka! Put things in shape here—sweep the platform and the rails. Look at all the rubbish they've left behind."

"I know, Matvei Yegorovich."

"Well, shall we have tea, Nikolai Petrovich?"

"As usual," replies his assistant.

If it happens to have been the noon train that has passed, Matvei Yegorovich says to his wife: "Is dinner ready, Sonya?"

Then he gives Luka instructions which are always the same, and says to his assistant, who boards with them:

"Well, shall we have dinner?"

"We shall," his assistant replies, reasonably enough.

And they leave the platform and go into a room that has a great many plants and very little furniture in it, a room that smells of cooking and diapers and where the table talk is always about what has passed them by.

"Did you notice that brunette in the yellow dress in the second-class carriage, Nikolai Petrovich? A tempting morsel, if you ask me!"

"Not bad, but no taste in clothes," says his assistant.

His remarks are always brief and spoken with assurance, for he prides himself on being a man of education and experience. He finished the gymnasium. He has a note-book with a black binding in which he writes down sayings by eminent men which he finds in the books and newspapers that happen to fall into his hands. The stationmaster accepts his authority in all matters outside their work, and listens attentively to whatever he has to say. He is especially impressed by the gems of wisdom to be found in Nikolai Petrovich's note-book and goes into ecstasies over them in a simple-hearted way. His assistant's observation on the brunette's taste in clothes raises doubts in his own mind.

"Why?" he asks. "Shouldn't brunettes wear yellow?"

"I wasn't thinking of the colour, but of the cut," explains Nikolai Petrovich as he neatly

transfers some jam from the glass dish to his own plate.

“Cut? That’s another thing,” agrees the stationmaster.

His wife joins in the conversation, for this is a subject close to her heart and accessible to her mind. But since the intellects of these people have been subjected to little refinement, their talk drags on feebly and rarely touches their emotions.

Through the windows can be seen the steppe, which is under a spell of silence; and the sky, magnificent in its detached serenity.

Scarcely an hour passes but a goods train goes by. The crews of all these trains are old acquaintances. The guards are somnolent creatures who have had the spirit taken out of them by endless trips through the steppe. To be sure, they sometimes recount stories of accidents on the way: at a certain place a man was killed. Or they gossip about their work: so-and-so was fined, somebody else was transferred. These titbits are not discussed; they are gobbled up as a glutton gobbles up a rare and tasty dish.

Slowly the sun sinks to the rim of the steppe, turning crimson as it draws near the earth. A reddish glow is cast over everything, and this gives rise to a vague longing—the lure of the spaces beyond the wilderness. At last the sun touches the horizon and drops listlessly into or behind it. For a long time after that the bright tones of the sunset play soft music in the sky, but it grows fainter and fainter as a warm and soundless dusk sets in. Stars come out, all a-tremble, as if frightened by the dreariness of the scene.

The steppe seems to shrink in the dusk; silently the shadows of night close in on the station from all sides. And then comes night itself, dark and gloomy.

Lights are lit at the station. Higher and brighter than all others is the green signal light, encompassed by darkness and silence.

From time to time a bell clangs, giving notice of an approaching train; the urgent sound is borne out into the steppe, where it is swallowed up.

Shortly after the clanging of the bell a red light comes flashing out of the dark waste, and the silence of the steppe is shattered by the roar of a train making its way towards the lonely station wrapped in darkness.

The lives of the "lower classes" at this little station were different from those of the aristocracy. Luka, the station guard, waged a constant struggle with his desire to run off to his wife and brother who lived in a village seven versts from the station. He had a "farm" there, as he usually put it to Gomozov when asking this staid and taciturn switchman to "do duty" for him.

The word "farm" invariably drew a sigh from Gomozov.

"Very well, go ahead," he would say. "A farm has got to be looked after, no doubt about that."

But the other switchman—Afanasy Yagodka, an old soldier with a round red face covered with grey stubble—was of a mocking disposition, and he did not believe Luka.

"A farm!" he would scoff derisively. "A wife, that makes more sense. And that wife of yours—is she a widow? Or is her husband a soldier?"

"You Birdie-Brigadier!" Luka would snort contemptuously.

He called Yagodka the Birdie-Brigadier because the old soldier had a passion for birds. His little house was hung inside and out with cages and perches; and all day long, inside the house

and all around it, could be heard the clamour of the birds. The quails which the soldier had taken captive kept up a monotonous and uninterrupted "cheep-chirreep!", the starlings muttered long speeches, little birds of all colours peeped, chirped and sang tirelessly, filling the soldier's lonely life with delight. He devoted all his leisure to them, and while being solicitous of and devoted to the birds, took not the slightest interest in his fellows at the station. He called Luka a snake and Gomozov a *katsap*, and accused them to their faces of trailing the women, for which, in his opinion, they deserved a good thrashing.

As a rule, Luka paid little attention to his taunts, but if the soldier went too far, Luka would tear into him at length and with vengeance:

"You garrison rat, you half-chewed turnip! What're you good for, you drummer-boy to the colonel's goat? All you've ever done is chase frogs under the guns and stand guard over the company's cabbages Who are you to be calling other people names? Go back to your quails, you Birdie-Brigadier!"

After calmly listening to such a tirade, Yagodka would go and complain to the stationmaster, who would shout that he had more important matters to attend to and turn him out. After which Yagodka would find Luka and undertake to give Luka a tongue-lashing himself—calmly, without losing his temper, employing a vocabulary so weightily obscene that Luka would run away spitting in disgust.

If the soldier jeered Gomozov because of his frivolity, the latter would sigh and make uneasy efforts to defend himself.

"What's to be done? Looks as if it just can't be helped. It's the mischief, all right, but, as they say, judge not lest ye be judged yourselves."

One day the soldier replied to this by saying with a little laugh:

"The same old recipe for all ills! 'Judge not.' 'judge not.' Why, if people didn't judge their fellows they wouldn't have anything to talk about!"

There was one other woman at the station besides the stationmaster's wife. This was Arina, the cook. She was almost forty years old and exceedingly ugly—umpy in figure, with long pendulous breasts, and always dirty and unkempt. She waddled when she walked and there was an intimidated look in the slits of eyes that glinted in her pock-marked face. There was something cowed and slave-like in her ungainly form. Her thick lips were permanently pursed, as if she wanted to ask forgiveness of everyone—as if she wanted to fall on her knees before people, and was afraid of crying. For eight months Gomozov lived at the station without paying any particular attention to her. He would say "Hullo" in passing, she would return the salutation, they might exchange a few perfunctory words, then each would continue on his way. But one day Gomozov came into the stationmaster's kitchen and asked Arina to make him some shirts. She agreed to, and when they were ready, she took them to him herself.

"Thanks," said Gomozov. "Three shirts at ten kopeks a piece—that'll be thirty kopeks I owe you, won't it?"

"I guess so," said Arina.

Gomozov fell to thinking.

"What gubernia are you from?" he said at last to this woman, whose eyes had been fixed on his beard all this time.

"Ryazan," she said.

"Pretty far away. How did you ever come here?"

"I don't know. I'm all alone. Haven't got nobody."

"That's enough to make a person go even farther," sighed Gomozov.

And both of them were silent again.

"Take me I'm from Nizhny Novgorod. Ser-gachev Uyezd," said Gomozov after a while. "I'm alone, too. Nobody at all. But once upon a time I had a house and a wife and children. Two of them. My wife died of the cholera, the kids of one thing or another. And me—I wore myself out with grieving. Later on I tried to start all over again but it was no good. The works had run down and there was no winding them up again. So off I went—as far away as I could. I've been living like this for more than two years."

"It's bad when you've not got a place to call your own," said Arina softly.

"Very bad. Are you a widow?"

"No, I'm a maid."

"Go along with you!" said Gomozov, taking no pains to disguise his incredulity.

"Honest to goodness," insisted Arina.

"Why didn't you ever get married?"

"Who'd have me? I haven't got nothing. A man'd want something. And then my face is so ugly."

"True," drawled Gomozov, scrutinising her curiously as he stroked his beard. He asked her what her pay was.

"Two and a half."

"I see. So I owe you thirty kopeks, eh? Look, come and get it tonight. About ten o'clock, will you? I'll pay you and we'll have a glass of tea together for want of something better to do. We're lonely souls, both of us. Do come."

"I will," she said simply, and went out.

She came back at exactly ten o'clock and went away at dawn.

Gomozov did not invite her to come again and did not give her her thirty kopeks. She came back of her own accord. She came back, bovine and submissive, and stood silently in front of him. And he stared up at her from where he was lying on the couch.

"Sit down," he said after a while, moving over.

When she was seated, he said, "Listen, keep this dark. Don't let a soul get wind of it, hear? I'll get into trouble if you do. I'm not young any more, and neither are you, understand?"

She nodded.

As he was seeing her out he handed her some clothes to mend for him.

"Don't let a soul get wind of it," he admonished her again.

And so, carefully hiding their relationship from others, they went on living together.

At night Arina would steal to his room almost on all fours. He received her indulgently, with the air of a lord and master.

"What a mug you've got!" he would say at times.

She would only smile back feebly and apologetically, and on leaving would take some bundle of work to do for him.

They did not see each other often. But sometimes when they met on the station grounds, he would whisper:

"Drop in tonight."

And she would come obediently and with a look of such gravity on her pock-marked face that one would have thought she was fulfilling a duty whose solemn importance she fully appreciated.

But on going home the old look of guilt and apprehension would come back.

Occasionally she would linger in some secluded corner or behind a tree to gaze out into the steppe. Night reigned out there, and its grim silence filled her heart with terror.

One day, after seeing off the afternoon train, the station officials sat down to tea in the shade of some poplars growing outside the windows of the stationmaster's rooms.

They often had tea there on hot days—it introduced a certain variety into the monotony of their lives.

On this particular day they were drinking in silence, having said all there was to say about the last train.

"Today's hotter than yesterday," said the stationmaster, holding out his empty glass to his wife with one hand and wiping the sweat off his forehead with the other.

"It just seems hotter because you're bored to death," said his wife as she took the glass.

"H'm, maybe you're right. Cards would help. But there's only three of us."

His assistant shrugged his shoulders and screwed up his eyes.

"Card games, according to Schopenhauer, show the bankruptcy of the mind," he pronounced impressively.

"Very clever," gurgled the stationmaster. "What was that? The bankruptcy of the mind—h'm. Who was it said it?"

"Schopenhauer. A German philosopher."

"A philosopher? H'm."

"Those philosophers—what do they do? Work at universities?" inquired Sonya.

"How shall I explain it? Being a philosopher is not a situation, but a natural endowment, so to speak. Anyone can be a philosopher—anyone who is born with a tendency to think and to seek cause and effect in all things. To be sure, philosophers are sometimes to be found in universities, but they may be anywhere—even in the employment of the railway."

"And do they make a lot of money—those who are at the universities?"

"It all depends on their capabilities."

"If only we had a fourth partner, we'd put in a nice couple of hours," sighed the stationmaster.

And the talk broke off again.

High in the blue sky sang the larks, from branch to branch of the poplars hopped the robins, whistling softly. From inside the house came the crying of a baby.

"Is Arina in there?" asked the stationmaster.

"Of course," replied his wife.

"There's something highly original about that woman, have you noticed it, Nikolai Petrovich?"

"'Originality is the mother of banality,'" mused Nikolai Petrovich, looking very sage and ponderous.

"What's that?" perked up the stationmaster.

When the saying had been repeated in edifying accents, the stationmaster half-closed his eyes deliciously, while his wife remarked in languorous tones:

"It's simply wonderful the way you remember what you read! As for me, I read something one day and forget it the next. Why, just the other day I read something frightfully interesting and amusing in the *Niva* but for the life of me I can't remember what it was."

"All a matter of habit," explained Nikolai Petrovich tersely.

"That's even better than that—what's his name? Schopenhauer," said the stationmaster with a smile. "In other words, everything new grows old."

"Or just the reverse, for, as one of the poets has said: 'Life in her wisdom is frugal, for she always makes the new out of the old.'"

"Damn it all, where do you get them from? They come pouring out of you like out of a sieve!"

The stationmaster gave a delighted chuckle, his wife smiled sweetly, and Nikolai Petrovich made a vain effort to hide his satisfaction.

"Who was it said that about banality?"

"Baryatinsky, a poet."

"And that other?"

"Also a poet. Fofanov."

"Smart fellows," said the stationmaster in approbation of the poets, and he repeated the quotation in a sing-song voice, a rapt smile on his face.

The boredom of their lives played a sort of game with them; it would release them from its clutches for a moment, only to seize them the tighter. Then they would grow silent again and sit there puffing with the heat, which their tea-drinking only intensified.

There was nothing but sun in the steppe.

"As I was saying about Arina," resumed the stationmaster. "She's a queer creature. I can't help wondering at her. It's as if she'd been struck down by something—never laughs, never sings, hardly ever speaks. Like a stump in the ground. But she's a first-class worker. And the way she looks after Lolya—nothing's too much to do for the baby."

He spoke in lowered tones for fear Arina might overhear him. He was well aware that one must never pay servants compliments—it spoils them. Sonya interrupted him and gave a frown full of hidden meaning:

"Enough of such talk. There's lots of things you don't know about her," she said.

Nikolai Petrovich began to sing softly, beating time with his spoon on the table:

*A slave to love,
I lack the strength
To flight with thee,
My blessed demon.*

"What? What's that?" put in the stationmaster. "Her? You must be fooling, both of you!"

And he burst into loud laughter. His jowls shook and drops of sweat dripped off his brow.

"It's not funny in the least," said Sonya. "For one thing, she's in charge of the baby, and for another—just look at this bread! Burnt and sour. And why?"

"There's no doubt it, the bread's not what it should be. You'll have to scold her for it. But good God, I never expected this. Why, damn it all, she's nothing but dough herself! And he! Who is he? Luka? Won't I tease him, the rascal! Or Yagodka—Old Shave-Lip?"

"Gomozov," said Nikolai Petrovich tersely.

"Him? That quiet fellow? Come, you must be making it up!"

The stationmaster was highly amused by the discovery. One minute he would laugh till he cried, the next he would observe seriously that the lovers would have to be given a severe reprimand, and then, as he imagined the tender words exchanged between them, he would go off into peals of laughter again.

In the end he began to probe for details. At that Nikolai Petrovich pulled a stern face and Sonya cut him short.

"The baboons! Just wait, I'll have some fun with them yet! Very amusing," said the irrepressible stationmaster.

At that moment Luka put in an appearance.

"Telegraph's clicking," he announced.

"I'm coming. Signal Number 42."

Presently he and his assistant were making their way to the station where Luka was ringing the bell to signal the train. Nikolai Petrovich telegraphed to the next station for permission to despatch train No. 42 while the stationmaster paced the floor of the office, smiling to himself and saying:

"You and me'll play a trick on them, shall we? For want of something better to do. At least we'll have a laugh."

"That's permissible," said Nikolai Petrovich as he operated the telegraph key.

Philosophers, as he knew, should be laconic.

Very soon after that an opportunity for them to have their laugh presented itself.

One night Gomozov visited Arina in the shed where, at his demand and with the consent of her mistress, Arina had made a bed for herself among all kinds of lumber. It was cold and damp there, and the broken chairs, discarded tubs, boards, and other rubbish took on fearsome forms in the dark. When Arina was alone she was so terrified she could not sleep and would lie in the straw with wide-open eyes, mumbling prayers to herself.

Gomozov came, mauled her for a long time without saying a word, grew tired and fell asleep. But Arina woke him up almost immediately.

"Timofei Petrovich! Timofei Petrovich!" she whispered in alarm.

"What?" replied Gomozov, only half-awake.

"They've locked us in."

"What's that?" he asked as he jumped up.

"They came to the door and padlocked it."

"You're crazy!" he whispered in fright and anger, thrusting her away.

"See for yourself," she said humbly.

He got up, went stumbling past the lumber to the door and gave it a push.

"It's all that soldier's doings," he said gloomily after a pause.

A burst of laughter came from the other side of the door.

"Let me out!" called Gomozov.

"What's that?" came the soldier's voice.

"Let me out, I say."

"In the morning," said the soldier, turning away.

"I've got to go on duty, damn it all!" pleaded Gomozov wrathfully.

"I'll do duty for you. Stay right where you are."

And the soldier went away.

"You dirty dog!" muttered the switchman miserably. "Here, he can't lock me in like this. There's the stationmaster. What'll he tell him? The stationmaster'll be sure to ask where Gomozov is, and then what'll he say?"

"I'm afraid it's the stationmaster told him to do it," murmured Arina dismally.

"The stationmaster?" repeated Gomozov in fright. "Why should he do such a thing?" He grew thoughtful a moment, then shouted at her, "You're lying!"

A profound sigh was her only answer.

"God, what'll happen now?" said the switchman, seating himself on a tub by the door. "I'm disgraced. And it's all your fault, you pig-faced monster!"

And he shook his fist in the direction from which came the sound of her breathing. She said nothing.

They were enveloped in grey shadows—shadows impregnated by the smell of mould and sauerkraut and some other acrid smell that tickled the nostrils. Thin ribbons of moonlight slipped through cracks in the door. From outside came the rumble of a goods train withdrawing from the station.

“Why don’t you say something, you scarecrow?” said Gomozov, angry and contemptuous. “What am I to do now? You got me into this fix, and now you have nothing to say? Think of a way out, damn you! How am I going to live down this disgrace? God! What ever made me take up with such a creature!”

“I’ll ask them to forgive me,” said Arina softly.

“Well?”

“Maybe they will.”

“What’s that to me? All right, they’ll forgive you; what of it? Am I disgraced or not? They’ll have the laugh on me just the same.”

In a few minutes he began to curse and rail at her again. Time dragged on insufferably. At last the woman said to him in a trembling voice:

“Forgive me, Timofei Petrovich.”

“Forgive you with an axe that’s what I’d like to do,” he snarled.

And again there was silence, heavy and oppressive, full of aching misery for the two people imprisoned in the darkness.

“Lordy, if only it would get light!” moaned Arina.

“Hold your tongue! I’ll show you a light!” threatened Gomozov, and hurled another string of abuse at her. Then again the torture of silence. Time seemed to drag even more cruelly with the

coming of dawn, as if each minute loitered on purpose, finding entertainment in the comic situation of these two people.

After a while Gomozov fell asleep and was wakened up by the crowing of a rooster outside the shed.

"Hey, pig-face, are you asleep?" he whispered.

"No," replied Arina with a sigh.

"Why not?" he asked ironically. "Ugh!"

"Timofei Petrovich!" wailed Arina. "Don't be angry with me. Take pity on me. In the name of Christ, take pity on me. I'm all alone, without a soul in the world. You—you're the only one I have. After all, we—"

"Stop howling! Don't make people laugh," interrupted Gomozov harshly, suppressing the woman's hysterical whispers which nonetheless softened him somewhat. "Hold your tongue, you half-wit."

And so, without speaking, they went on waiting for the passage of each successive minute. But the passage of the minutes brought them nothing. At last rays of sunlight came through the cracks in the door, stitching through the darkness in shining threads. Steps were heard outside. Someone came up to the door, stood there a moment, and went away.

"Fiends!" roared Gomozov, spitting viciously. Once more they waited in strained silence.

"Dear Lord, have mercy . . ." murmured Arina.

Stealthy steps seemed to be heard. Suddenly the lock clicked and the stern voice of the stationmaster was heard.

"Gomozov!" he cried, "Take Arina's arm and lead her out! Lively, now!"

"Come here, you," muttered Gomozov. Arina went over and stood beside him with hanging head.

The door was opened, and there stood the stationmaster.

"Congratulations on your newly-wedded state," he said, bowing to Arina. "Come, strike up the band!"

Gomozov stepped outside and was stopped by a deafening burst of noise. Luka, Yagodka and Nikolai Petrovich were standing at the door. Luka was beating on the bottom of a pail with his fist and shouting at the top of his lungs in a strident tenor; the soldier was blowing a tin horn; Nikolai Petrovich, his cheeks distended, was waving one hand and blowing through his lips as if on a trumpet:

"Pom! Pom! Pom-pom-pom!"

The pail made a crashing sound; the horn shrieked and wailed. The stationmaster bent in two with laughter. His assistant, too, burst out laughing at the sight of the dumbfounded Gomozov whose face was ashen and whose trembling lips were twisted into an embarrassed smile. Behind him stood Arina, her head on her chest, as motionless as if turned to stone.

Luka made dreadful faces at Gomozov as he sang:

*Arina whispered in his ear
What any lover loves to hear.*

The soldier went over to Gomozov and tooted his horn in his very ear.

"Come along. Come on, take her arm!" cried the stationmaster, choking with laughter.

"Oh, oh! Stop it! I'll die!" shrieked Sonya who was sitting on the porch rocking with laughter.

"For a moment's bliss I shall suffer all," sang Nikolai Petrovich.

"Hurrah for the newly-weds!" called out the stationmaster as Gomozov took a step forward.

And all four of them shouted "Hurrah!" the soldier in a roaring bass.

Arina followed at the heels of Gomozov. Now her head was raised, her mouth hung open and her arms dangled limply at her sides. Her dull eyes stared in front of her, but it is doubtful that they saw anything.

"Make them kiss each other, husband! Ha, ha, ha!"

"A kiss, newly-weds!" shouted Nikolai Petrovich, at which the stationmaster's legs refused to support him and he sank weakly against the trunk of a tree. The pail kept clanging, the horn tooted and hooted, and Luka did a little dance as he sang:

*The cabbage soup Arina made
Is much too thick, I am afraid!*

Nikolai Petrovich blew out his cheeks again: "Pom-pom-pom! Toot-toot-toot! Pom-pom! Toot-toot!"

When Gomozov reached the door of the barracks he disappeared. Arina was left standing in the courtyard surrounded by a group of wild people who shouted, laughed, whistled in her ear, and leaped about her in an orgy of merriment. There she stood in their midst with immobile face—dirty, unkempt, pitiable, absurd.

"The bridegroom's gone off and left her behind," called the stationmaster to his wife, pointing his finger at Arina and doubling up with laughter.

Arina turned her head to him and then walked past the barracks, out into the steppe. Her departure was attended by shouts, laughter, hooting.

"Enough! Leave her alone!" called out Sonya. "Give her a chance to come to. The dinner's got to be cooked, don't forget."

Arina went out into the steppe; out beyond the demarcation line to a field of shaggy wheat. She walked slowly, like one lost in thought.

"How did you like it?" asked the stationmaster of the participants in this little joke, who were now reminding each other of choice details of the newly-weds' behaviour. They were all roaring with laughter. And even here Nikolai Petrovich found occasion to insert one of his gems of wisdom:

*It is no crime to laugh
At what is laughable.*

This he said to Sonya, adding as a caution, "But it is harmful to laugh too much."

There was a great deal of laughter at the station that day, but a very bad dinner, for Arina did not come back to cook it and this task devolved upon the stationmaster's wife. But even a bad dinner could not cast a damp over people's spirits. Gomozov did not come out of the barracks until it was time for him to go on duty. When he did come out he was summoned to the stationmaster's office where Nikolai Petrovich, to the vast amusement of Matvei Yegorovich and Luka, cross-examined him as to how he had "conquered" his beauty.

"The most extraordinary tale of man's temptation and fall I've ever heard," said Nikolai Petrovich to the stationmaster.

"And a very bad fall it was," said the staid Gomozov with a wry smile. He realised that if he could give an account making Arina look ridiculous, he himself would be spared much of the laughter.

"At first she just kept winking at me," he said.

"Winking? Ho, ho, ho! Fancy that, Nikolai Petrovich—*her* winking! Simply smashing!"

"Just kept winking, that is, and I says to myself, 'It's mischief you're up to, my girl!' After that she says to me, 'If you want me to, I'll make you some shirts.' "

"But the important thing was not the needle," observed Nikolai Petrovich, adding to the station-master by way of explanation, "That, you know, is from one of Nekrasov's poems. Go on, Gomozov."

And Gomozov went on, at first with an effort, but little by little gaining inspiration from his lies, for he saw that they were serving him well.

Meanwhile she of whom he spoke was lying in the steppe. She had walked far out into the sea of wheat, where she had sunk heavily down on to the ground and lay without moving. When she could no longer stand the heat of the sun on her back, she turned over and covered her face with her hands to cut off the sight of a sky that was too clear, a sun that was too bright.

Soft was the rustle of the wheat about this woman, crushed by shame; ceaseless and solicitous the chirping of innumerable grasshoppers. It was hot. She tried to pray, but could not remember the words of a prayer. Mocking faces danced before her eyes. Her ears were full of the sounds of laughter, the tooting of the horn, Luka's shrill voice. This, or the heat, constricted her chest, and she unfastened her blouse and exposed her body to the sun, hoping it would be easier to breathe. The sun scorched her skin; something hot seemed to be boring inside her breast; her breath came in gasps.

"Lord, have mercy . . ." she murmured from time to time.

But the only reply was the rustle of the wheat and the chirping of the grasshoppers. Lifting her head above the waves of wheat, she saw their golden shimmer, saw the black water-tower thrusting into the air beyond the station, saw the roofs of the station buildings. There was nothing else on the boundless yellow plain covered by the blue vault of the sky, and it seemed to Arina that she was alone in all the world, and that she was lying in the very centre of it, and that no one would ever come to relieve the burden of her loneliness... no one... ever....

Towards evening she heard cries.

"Arina! Arina, you cow!"

One of the voices belonged to Luka, the other to the soldier. She had hoped to hear a third voice, but he did not call her, and because of this she shed copious tears that ran swiftly down her pock-marked cheeks on to her breast. And as she cried she rubbed her bare breast against the dry warm earth to stop the burning sensation that had become more and more tormenting. She cried, and then she stopped crying, suppressing her sobs as if afraid someone would hear her and forbid her to cry.

When night came she got up and slowly made her way back to the station.

When she reached the buildings she stood leaning against the wall of the shed for a long time gazing out over the steppe. A goods train came and went, and she overheard the soldier telling the story of her shame to the conductors, who roared with laughter. Their laughter was carried far out into the steppe, where the marmots were peeping softly.

"Lord, have mercy," sighed the woman, pressing her body against the wall. But her sighs did not lighten the burden on her heart.

Towards morning she climbed up into the attic of the station and hanged herself with the clothes line.

The smell of the corpse led them to find Arina two days later. At first they were frightened; then they began to discuss who might be held guilty for what had happened. Nikolai Petrovich proved irrefutably that Gomozov was the guilty one. The stationmaster gave the switchman a blow on the jaw and warned him to keep his mouth shut.

Officials came and carried on an investigation. It was discovered that Arina had suffered from melancholia. Some railway workmen were ordered to take the body out into the steppe and bury it. This done, peace and order once more reigned at the station.

And once more its inhabitants lived four minutes a day, pining away with loneliness and boredom, with heat and idleness, gazing enviously after the trains that rushed past leaving them behind.

... And in the winter, when blizzards came screaming and shrieking out of the steppe, pouring snow and fearsome sounds upon the little station, life there was lonelier than ever.

1897

TWENTY-SIX MEN AND A GIRL*

We were twenty-six men, twenty-six living machines boxed up in a dark hole of a basement, where from morn till night we kneaded dough, making pretzels and cracknels. The windows of our basement looked out on a hole lined with bricks that were green with slime. The windows, on the outside, were closely grated, and no ray of sunshine could reach us through the panes, which were plastered with meal. Our boss had fenced off the windows to prevent any of his bread from going to beggars or to those of our mates who were out of work and starving—our boss called us a bunch of crooks and gave us tainted tripe for dinner instead of meat.

Life was stuffy in that crowded dungeon, beneath a low-hanging ceiling covered with soot and cobwebs. Life was hard and sickening within those thick walls smudged with dirt stains and mildew. We got up at five in the morning, heavy from not enough sleep, and at six, dull and listless, we sat down at the table to make pretzels and cracknels out of the dough which our mates had prepared while we were sleeping. And the livelong day, from early morning till ten at night,

* The story describes an event from the Kazan period of Gorky's life, when he worked in Vasily Semyonov's pretzel. In his book *My Universities* Gorky writes: "This period of my life I have outlined in the stories *The Master*, *Konovalov*, *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl*. A miserable time! But an instructive one."

N. K. Krupskaya tells us in her reminiscences that this story was one of Lenin's favourites —*Ed.*

some of us sat at the table shaping the stiff dough and swaying our bodies to fight numbness, while others were mixing flour and water. And all day long the simmering water in the cauldron where the pretzels were cooking gurgled drearily and sadly, and the baker's shovel clattered angrily and swiftly on the hearthstone as it flung slippery cooked pieces of dough onto the hot bricks. From morning till night the wood burned in the oven, and the ruddy glow of the flames flickered on the bakery walls, as though in silent mockery. The huge oven resembled the ugly head of some fantastic monster thrust up from under the floor, its gaping jaws ablaze with glowing fire, breathing heat at us, and watching our ceaseless toil through two sunken air-holes over its forehead. These two hollows were like eyes—the pitiless impassive eyes of a monster; they stared at us balefully, as though weary with looking at slaves of whom nothing human could be expected, and whom they despised with the cold contempt of wisdom.

Day in, day out, amid the meal dust and the grime which we brought in on our feet from the yard, in the smelly stuffiness of the hot basement, we kneaded dough and shaped pretzels, which were sprinkled with our sweat, and we hated our work with a fierce hatred, and never ate what our hands had made, preferring black rye bread to pretzels. Sitting at a long table facing one another—nine men on each side—we worked our hands and fingers mechanically through the long hours, and had grown so accustomed to our work that we no longer watched our movements. And we had grown so accustomed to one another that each of us knew every furrow on his mates' faces. We had nothing to talk about, we were used to that, and were silent all the time—unless we swore, for there is always something one can swear

at a man for, especially one's mate. But we seldom swore at each other—is a man to blame if he is half-dead, if he is like a stone image, if all his senses are blunted by the crushing burden of toil? Silence is awful and irksome only to those who have said all there is to say; but to people whose words are still unspoken, silence is natural and easy. Sometimes we sang, and this is how our song would start: during the work somebody would suddenly heave a sigh, like a weary horse, and begin softly to sing one of those long-drawn songs whose mournful tender melody always lightens the heavy burden of the singer's heart. One of the men would sing while the rest listened in silence to the lonely song, and it would flag and fade away beneath the oppressive basement ceiling like the dying flames of a campfire in the steppe on a wet autumn night, when the grey sky overhangs the earth like a roof of lead. Then another singer would join the first, and the two voices would float drearily and softly in the stuffy heat of our crowded pen. Then suddenly, several voices at once would join in—and the song would be lashed up like a wave, growing stronger and louder, and seeming to break down the dank, heavy walls of our prison.

Now all twenty-six would be singing; loud voices, brought to harmony by long practice, fill the workshop; the song is cramped for space; it buffets the stone walls, moaning and weeping, and stirs the heart with a gentle prickly pain, reopening old wounds and wakening anguish in the soul. The singers draw deep heavy sighs; one will suddenly break off and sit listening for a long time to his mates, then his voice will mingle again with the general chorus. Another will cry out dismally, "Ah!", singing with closed eyes, and maybe he sees the broad torrent of sound as a road running

far out, a wide road bathed in brilliant sunshine and he himself walking along it. . . .

The flames in the oven still flicker, the baker's shovel still scrapes on the brick, the water in the cauldron still bubbles and gurgles, the firelight on the wall still quivers in silent laughter. And we chant out, through words which are not our own, the dull ache within us, the gnawing grief of living men deprived of the sun, the grief of slaves. And so we lived, twenty-six men, in the basement of a big stone building, and the burden of life was so heavy that one would think the three storeys of the house were built on our shoulders.

Apart from our songs there was something else that we loved and cherished, something that perhaps filled the place of the sun for us. On the first floor of our building there was a gold embroidery workshop, and there, among many girl hands, lived sixteen-year-old Tanya, a housemaid. Every morning a pink face with blue merry eyes would be pressed to the pane of the little window cut into the door of our workshop, and a sweet ringing voice would call out to us:

“Hullo, jail-birdies! Give us some pretzels!”

We would all turn our heads to the sound of that clear voice and look kindly and joyfully at the pure girlish face that smiled at us so sweetly. We loved to see the nose flattened against the glass, the little white teeth glistening from under rosy lips parted in a smile. We would rush to open the door for her, jostling one another, and there she would be, so chirpy and charming, holding out her apron, standing before us with her head cocked and face radiant. A thick long braid of chestnut hair hung over her shoulder on her breast.

Grimy, coarse, ugly men, we looked up at her—the threshold rose four steps above the floor—looked up at her with raised heads and wished her good morning, and our words of greeting were special words, found only for her. When we spoke to her our voices were softer, our joking lighter. Everything we had for her was special. The baker drew out of the oven a shovelful of the crustiest browned pretzels and shot them adroitly into Tanya's apron.

"Mind the boss doesn't catch you!" we would warn her. She laughed roguishly and cried merrily:

"Bye-bye, jail-birdies!" and would vanish in a twinkling like a little mouse.

And that would be all.... But long after she had gone we talked about her—we said the same things we had said yesterday and the day before, because she, and we, and everything around us were the same they had been yesterday and the day before. It is very painful and hard for a man to live and have nothing change around him. If it doesn't kill the soul in him, the longer he lives the more painful does the immobility of things surrounding him become. We always talked about women in a way that sometimes made us feel disgusted with ourselves and with our coarse shameless talk. That is not surprising, since the women we knew probably did not deserve to be talked about in any other way. But about Tanya we never said a bad word. None of us ever dared to touch her with his hand and she never heard a loose joke from any of us. Perhaps it was because she never stayed long—she would flash before our gaze like a star falling from the heavens and vanish. Or perhaps because she was small and so very beautiful, and everything that is beautiful inspires respect, even with rough men.

Moreover, though drudgery was turning us into dumb oxen, we were still human beings, and like all human beings, could not live without an object of worship. Finer than she there was nobody about us, and nobody else took notice of us men living in the basement, though there were dozens of tenants in the house. And finally—probably this was the main reason—we regarded her as something that belonged to us, something that owed its existence to our pretzels. We made it our duty to give her hot pretzels, and this became our daily sacrifice to the idol, almost a sacred rite, that endeared her to us more and more every day. Besides pretzels, we gave Tanya a good deal of advice—to dress warmly, not to run too fast up the stairs, not to carry heavy bundles of firewood. She listened to our counsels with a smile, retorted with a laugh and never obeyed them, but we did not take offence—we were content to show our solicitude for her.

Often she asked us to do things for her. For example, she would ask us to open a refractory door in the cellar or chop some wood, and we would do these things for her and anything else she asked gladly, with a peculiar pride.

But when one of us asked her to mend his only shirt, she sniffed scornfully and said, "The idea! Not likely!"

We had a good laugh at the silly fellow's expense, and never again asked her to do anything. We loved her—and there all is said. A man always wants to foist his love on somebody or other, though it frequently oppresses, sometimes sullies, and may even poison the life of a fellow creature, for in loving he does not respect the object of his love. We had to love Tanya, for there was no one else we could love.

At times one of us would suddenly start argu-

ing: "What's the idea, making such a fuss over the kid? What's there so wonderful about her anyway?"

We'd brusquely silence the fellow who spoke like that—we had to have something we could love; we had found it, and loved it, and what we twenty-six loved went for each of us, it was our holy of holies, and anybody who went against us in this was our enemy. We loved, perhaps, what was not really good, but then there were twenty-six of us, and we therefore wanted the object of our adoration to be held sacred by others.

Our love is no less onerous than hate... and that, perhaps, is why some stiff-necked people claim that our hate is more flattering than love. But why do they not shun us if that is so?

Besides the pretzel bakery our boss had a bun bakery. It was situated in the same building, and only a wall divided it from our hole. The bun bakers, of whom there were four, held themselves aloof from us, however. They considered their work to be cleaner than ours, and themselves, therefore, better men; they never visited our workshop, and treated us with mocking scorn whenever they ran into us in the yard. We did not visit them either—the boss banned such visits for fear that we would steal buns. We hated the bun bakers, because we envied them—their work was easier than ours, they got better pay, they were fed better, they had a roomy airy workshop, and they were all so clean and healthy, and therefore so odious. We, on the other hand, were all a yellow grey-faced lot; three of us were ill with syphilis, some were scabby and one was crippled by rheumatism. On holidays and Sundays they used to dress up in suits and creaky high boots, two of

them possessed accordions, and all used to go out for a stroll in the park, while we were clothed in filthy tatters, with rags or bast shoes on our feet, and the police wouldn't let us into the park —now, could we love those bun bakers?

One day we learned that their head baker had taken to drink, that the boss had fired him and taken on another man in his place, and that the new man was an ex-soldier who went about in a satin waistcoat and owned a watch on a gold chain. We were curious to have a look at that dandy, and kept running out into the yard one after another in the hope of seeing him.

But he came to our workshop himself. Kicking open the door, he stood in the doorway, smiling, and said to us:

“Hullo! How do you do, boys!”

The frosty air rushing through the door in a smoky cloud eddied around his feet, while he stood in the doorway looking down at us, his large yellow teeth glinting from under his fair swaggering moustache. His waistcoat was indeed unique—a blue affair, embroidered with flowers, and all glittering, with buttons made from some kind of red stone. The chain was there too.

He was a handsome fellow, was that soldier—tall, strong, with ruddy cheeks and big light-coloured eyes that had a nice look in them—a kind, clean look. On his head he wore a white stiffly starched cap, and from under an immaculately clean apron peeped the pointed toes of a highly polished pair of fashionable shoes.

Our head baker asked him politely to close the door. He complied unhurriedly and began questioning us about the boss. We fell over each other to tell him that the boss was a skinflint, a crook, a scoundrel and a tormentor—the things we told him about the boss couldn't possibly be put in

writing here. The soldier listened, twitching his moustache and regarding us with that clear, gentle look of his.

"You've a lot of girls around here," he suddenly said.

Some of us laughed politely, others pulled sugary faces, and someone informed the soldier that there were nice bits of fluff about the place.

"Use 'em?" asked the soldier with a knowing wink.

Again we laughed, a rather subdued, embarrassed laugh. Many of us would have liked to make the soldier believe they were as gay sparks as he was, but they couldn't do it. None of us could. Somebody confessed as much, saying quietly:

"Them's not for us...."

"N'yes, you're miles out of it," the soldier said with conviction, looking us over narrowly. "You're not—er—up to the mark.... Ain't got the character... the right stuff, you know, the looks. Looks is what a woman likes about a man. Give her a regular body... everything just so. And then, of course, she likes a bit o' muscle. Likes an arm to be an arm, this kind o' stuff."

The soldier pulled his right hand out of his pocket with the sleeve rolled back to the elbow, and held it up for us to see. He had a strong white arm covered with shining golden hairs.

"The leg, chest, everything must be firm. And then a man's got to be dressed right, well turned out, you know. Take me now—the women just fall over themselves. Mind you, I don't go after them or tempt 'em—they just hang round my neck five at a time."

He sat down on a sack of flour and told us at great length how the women loved him and how dashingly he treated them. Then he took his leave, and when the door closed behind him with a

squeak, we sat on in a long silence, musing on him and his stories. Then suddenly everybody spoke up at once, and it transpired that we had all taken a liking to him. Such a nice, simple fellow, the way he had come in, sat down, and chatted. Nobody ever came to see us, nobody talked to us like that, friendly like. And we kept on talking about him and his future success with the seamstresses, who, on meeting us in the yard, either steered clear of us with a grimace of distaste, or bore straight down on us as if we were not there at all. And we only admired them, in the yard or when they passed our window, wearing their cute little hats and fur coats in the winter, and flowery hats with bright-coloured parasols in the summer. Among ourselves, however, we talked about these girls in a way that, had they heard us, would have made them mad with shame and indignation.

"I hope he doesn't... er, have a go at our Tanya," the head baker said suddenly in a tone of anxiety.

We were all struck dumb by this statement. We had somehow forgotten about Tanya—the soldier had blotted her out, as it were, with his large handsome figure. A noisy argument broke out: some said that Tanya would have none of him, some asserted that she would be unable to resist the soldier's charms, and others proposed to break the fellow's bones for him should he start making passes at Tanya. Finally, all decided to keep a watch on the soldier and Tanya, and to warn the kid against him. That put a stop to the argument.

About a month passed. The soldier baked buns, went out with the seamstresses, often dropped in to see us, but never said anything about his con-

quests—all he did was to twirl his moustache and lick his chops.

Tanya came every morning for her pretzels and was as gay, sweet and gentle as ever. We tried to broach the subject of the soldier with her—she called him a “pop-eyed dummy” and other funny names, and that set our minds at rest. We were proud of our little girl when we saw how the seamstresses clung to the soldier. Tanya’s attitude towards him bucked us all up, and under her influence, as it were, we ourselves began to treat him with scorn. We loved her more than ever and greeted her more gladly and kindly in the mornings.

One day, however, the soldier dropped in on us a little the worse for drink. He sat down and started to laugh, and when we asked him what was tickling him, he said:

“Two of ‘em have had a fight over me—Lida and Grusha. The things they did to each other! It was a real scream, ha-ha! One of ‘em grabbed the other by the hair, dragged her into the passage all over the floor, and then got on top of her. Ha-ha-ha! Scratched each other’s mugs, tore their clothes. Did I laugh! Why can’t these females have a straight fight? Why do they scratch, eh?”

He sat on a bench, looking so clean, healthy and cheerful, laughing without a stop. We said nothing. Somehow he was odious to us this time.

“Why am I such a lucky devil with the girls? It’s a scream! Why, I just give a wink and the trick’s done!”

He raised his white hands covered with shining hairs and brought them down on his knees with a slap. He surveyed us with a look of pleased surprise, as though himself genuinely astonished at the good luck he enjoyed with the ladies. His

plump ruddy face shone with smug pleasure and he kept passing his tongue over his lips.

Our head baker angrily rattled his shovel on the hearth and suddenly said sarcastically:

"It's no great fun felling little fir trees—I'd like to see what you'd do with a pine!"

"Eh, what? Were you talking to me?" the soldier queried.

"Yes, you."

"What did you say?"

"Never mind.... Let it lay."

"Here, hold on! What's it all about? What d'you mean—pine?"

Our baker did not reply. His shovel moved swiftly in the oven, tossing in boiled pretzels and shooting the baked ones onto the floor, where boys sat threading them on bast strings. He seemed to have forgotten the soldier. But the latter suddenly got all worked up. He rose to his feet and stepped up to the oven, exposing himself to the imminent danger of being struck in the chest by the shovel handle, which whisked spasmodically in the air.

"Look here—what d'you mean? That's an insult. Why, there isn't a girl that could resist me! No, sir! And here are you, letting out hints against me."

Indeed, he appeared to be genuinely offended. Evidently the sole source of his self-respect was his ability to seduce women; this ability, perhaps, was the only human attribute he could boast, the only thing that made him feel a human being.

There are people for whom the main thing in life is some sickness of the soul or the flesh. It fills all their lives, it is what they live for. While suffering from it, they nourish themselves on it. They complain to people about it, and in this manner command the interest of their fellow creatures. They exact a toll of sympathy from

people, and this is the only thing in life they have. Deprive them of that sickness, cure them of it, and they will be utterly miserable, because they will lose the sole sustenance of their life and become empty husks. Sometimes a man's life is so poor that he is perforce obliged to cultivate a vice and thrive on it. One might say that people are often addicted to vice through sheer boredom.

The soldier was stung to the quick. He bore down on our baker, whining:

“No, you tell me—who is it?”

“Want me to tell you?” the baker said, turning on him suddenly.

“Yes!”

“Do you know Tanya?”

“Well?”

“Well, there you are! See what you can do there.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Her? Easy as pie!”

“We'll see!”

“You'll see! Ha-a!”

“Why, she'll—”

“It won't take a month!”

“You're cocky, soldier, aren't you?”

“A fortnight! I'll show you! Who did you say? Tanya? Pshaw!”

“Come on, get out. You're in the way!”

“A fortnight, and the trick's done! Ugh, you!”

“Get out!”

The baker flew into a sudden rage and brandished his shovel. The soldier recoiled in amazement, then regarded us all for a while in silence, muttered grimly “All right!” and went out.

We had listened to this exchange in silence, deeply interested. But when the soldier left we all broke out into loud and excited argument.

Somebody cried out to the baker:

“That’s a bad business you’ve started, Pavel!”

“Get on with your work!” snapped the baker.

We realised that the soldier’s vanity had been pricked and that Tanya was in danger. And yet, while aware of this, we were all seized with a burning pleasurable curiosity as to what would be the outcome of it. Would Tanya hold her own against the soldier? We voiced the conviction almost unanimously:

“Tanya? She’ll hold her ground! She isn’t easy game, not her!”

We were terribly keen on putting our idol to the test. We tried our hardest to convince each other that our idol was a staunch idol and would stand up to this test. We even started wondering whether we had goaded the soldier sufficiently, fearing that he would forget the wager and that we would have to give some more pricks to his conceit. From now on, a new exciting interest had been added to our lives, something we had never known before. We argued among ourselves for days on end; somehow, we all seemed to have grown cleverer, we spoke better and more. It was as if we were playing a game with the devil, the stake on our side being Tanya. And when we learned from the bun bakers that their soldier had “made a dead set for Tanya”, our excitement rose to fever pitch and life became such a thrilling experience that we did not even notice how the boss had taken advantage of this to throw in an extra fourteen poods of dough daily. We didn’t even seem to tire of the work. Tanya’s name was on our lips all day long. We looked forward to her morning visits with a peculiar impatience. At times we fancied that when she came in to see us it would be a different Tanya, not the one we had always known.

We told her nothing about the wager, though.

We never asked her any questions and treated her in the same good-natured affectionate manner. But something new had crept into our attitude, something that was alien to our former feelings for Tanya—and that new element was keen curiosity, keen and cold as a blade of steel.

"Boys! Time's up today!" the baker said one morning as he began work.

We were well aware of it without being reminded. Yet we all started.

"You watch her. She'll soon come in," the baker suggested. Someone exclaimed ruefully: "It's not a thing the eye can catch."

And again a noisy lively argument sprang up. Today, at length, we would know how clean and incontaminant was the vessel to which we had trusted all the best that was in us. That morning it dawned on us for the first time that we were gambling for high stakes, that this test of our idol might destroy it for us altogether. All these days we had been hearing that the soldier had been doggedly pursuing Tanya with his attentions, but for some reason none of us asked her what she thought about him. She continued regularly to call on us every morning for her pretzels and was always her usual self.

That day, too, we soon heard her voice:

"Hullo, jail-birdies! I've come...."

We hastened to let her in, and when she came in we greeted her, contrary to custom, with silence. We looked hard at her and were at a loss what to say to her, what to ask her. We stood before her, a silent sullen crowd. She was obviously surprised at the unusual reception, and suddenly we saw her turn pale and looked disturbed. In a choky voice she asked:

"Why are you all so . . . strange?"

"What about yourself?" the baker said in a grim tone, his eyes fixed on her face.

"What about me?"

"Nothing."

"Well, give me the pretzels, quick."

Never before had she shown any signs of hurry.

"Plenty of time," the baker retorted without stirring, his eyes still glued on her face.

Abruptly she turned and disappeared through the door.

The baker picked up his shovel, and turning to the oven, let fall calmly:

"Well, she's fixed! He's done it, the blighter!"

We shambled back to the table like a herd of jostling sheep, sat down and silently and apathetically set to our work. Presently someone said:

"Maybe she hasn't—"

"Shut up! Enough of that!" the baker shouted.

We all knew him for a clever man, cleverer than any of us. And that shout of his told us that he was convinced of the soldier's victory. We felt sad and perturbed.

At twelve o'clock—the lunch-hour—the soldier came in. He was, as always, clean and spruce, and—as always—looked us straight in the face. We felt too ill at ease to look at him.

"Well, gentlemen, d'you want me to show you what a soldier can do?" he said with a proud sneer. "You just go out into the passage and peep through the cracks. Get me?"

We trooped out into the passage, and falling over each other, pressed our faces to the chinks in the wooden wall looking onto the yard. We did not have to wait long. Presently Tanya crossed the yard with a hurried step and an anxious look, skipping over puddles of thawed snow and mud. She disappeared through the door of the cellar. After a while the soldier sauntered past

whistling, and he, too, went in. His hands were thrust into his pockets and he twitched his moustache.

It was raining and we saw the drops falling into the puddles, which puckered up at the impact. It was a grey wet day—a very bleak day. Snow still lay on the roofs, while the ground was covered with dark patches of slush. On the roofs, too, the snow was covered with a brownish coating of dirt. It was cold and uncomfortable, waiting in that passage.

The first to come out of that cellar was the soldier. He walked leisurely across the yard, twitching his moustache, his hands deep in his pockets—much the same as usual.

Then Tanya came out. Her eyes ... her eyes shone with joy and happiness, and her lips smiled. And she walked as though in a dream, swaying, with unsteady gait....

It was more than we could stand. We all made a sudden dash for the door, burst into the yard and began yelling and whistling at her in a fierce, loud, savage uproar.

She started when she saw us and stood stock-still, her feet in a dirty puddle. We surrounded her and cursed her with a sort of malicious glee, pouring out a torrent of profanity and obscene taunts.

We did it unhurriedly, slowly, seeing that she had no means of escape from the circle around her, and that we could jeer at her to our heart's content. Surprisingly enough, we did not hit her. She stood among us, turning her head from side to side, listening to our insults. And we, more and more fiercely and furiously, flung at her the dirt and poison of our wrath.

Her face drained of life. Her blue eyes, which a moment before had looked so happy, were

dilated, her breath came in gasps, and her lips quivered

And we, standing round her, were wreaking our vengeance upon her—for had she not robbed us? She had belonged to us, we had spent our best feelings on her, and though that best was a mere beggar's pittance, we were twenty-six and she was one, and there was no pain we could inflict that was fit to meet her guilt. How we insulted her! She said not a word, but simply stared at us in sheer terror, trembling in all her body.

We guffawed, we howled, we snarled. Other people came up. One of us pulled the sleeve of Tanya's blouse.

Suddenly her eyes blazed. She raised her hands in a slow gesture to straighten her hair, and said loudly but calmly, straight into our faces:

“Oh, you miserable jail-birds!”

And she bore straight down on us, just as if we had not been there, had not stood in her path. Indeed, that is why none of us proved to be in her path.

When she was clear of our circle she added just as loudly, without turning round, in a tone of scorn and pride:

“Oh, you filthy swine. You beasts.” And she departed—straight, beautiful and proud.

We were left standing in the middle of the yard amid the mud, under the rain and a grey sky that had no sun in it.

Then we, too, shuffled back to our damp stony dungeon. As of old, the sun never peered through our window, and Tanya came no more.

SONG OF THE STORMY PETREL

High above the silvery ocean winds are gathering the storm-clouds, and between the clouds and ocean proudly wheels the Stormy Petrel, like a streak of sable lightning.

Now his wing the wave caresses, now he rises like an arrow, cleaving clouds and crying fiercely, while the clouds detect a rapture in the bird's courageous crying.

In that crying sounds a craving for the tempest! Sounds the flaming of his passion, of his anger, of his confidence in triumph.

The gulls are moaning in their terror—moaning, darting o'er the waters, and would gladly hide their horror in the inky depths of ocean.

And the grebes are also moaning. Not for them the nameless rapture of the struggle. They are frightened by the crashing of the thunder.

And the foolish penguins cower in the crevices of rocks, while alone the Stormy Petrel proudly wheels above the ocean, o'er the silver-frothing waters!

Ever lower, ever blacker, sink the stormclouds to the sea, and the singing waves are mounting in their yearning towards the thunder.

Strikes the thunder. Now the waters fiercely battle with the winds. And the winds in fury seize them in unbreakable embrace, hurling down the emerald masses to be shattered on the cliffs.

Like a streak of sable lightning wheels and cries the Stormy Petrel, piercing stormclouds like an arrow, cutting swiftly through the waters.

He is coursing like a Demon, the black Demon of the tempest, ever laughing, ever sobbing—he is laughing at the stormclouds, he is sobbing with his rapture.

In the crashing of the thunder the wise Demon hears a murmur of exhaustion. And he knows the storm will die and the sun will be triumphant; sun will always be triumphant!

The waters roar. The thunder crashes. Livid lightning flares in stormclouds high above the seething ocean, and the flaming darts are captured and extinguished by the waters, while the serpentine reflections writhe, expiring, in the deep.

It's the storm! The storm is breaking!

Still the valiant Stormy Petrel proudly wheels among the lightning, o'er the roaring, raging ocean, and his cry resounds exultant, like a prophecy of triumph—

Let it break in all its fury!

1901

“There are no better tales than
those which are born of life itself.”

Hans Christian Andersen

TALES OF ITALY*

CHILDREN OF PARMA

On the little square in front of the railway station in Genoa a dense crowd had gathered, workingmen for the most part but with a good sprinkling of well-fed, respectably dressed people as well. In front of the crowd stood members of the city council; above their heads waved the heavy and cunningly embroidered silk banner of the city, with the varicoloured banners of the workers' organisations beside it. The golden tassels, fringes, and cords glittered, the tips of the flagpoles shone, the silk rustled and a low hum like a choir singing *sotto voce* rose from the festive throng.

Above, on its tall pedestal, stood the statue of Columbus, the dreamer who had suffered so much for his beliefs and who won because he believed.

* These are four out of the collection of twenty-seven tales, written between 1906 and 1913

“As a matter of fact these are not tales, the flight of fancy of a man wearied and harassed by the harsh realities or tedium of life, who, to cheer his own soul and that of his fellow-men by the power of his imagination, creates a different life, one more vivid, festive and kindlier, or, perhaps, still more dreadful.... These are scenes of real life, as they appeared to me in Italy,” Gorky wrote of this cycle.—*Ed.*

Today too he looked down at the people and his marble lips seemed to be saying:

“Only those who believe can win.”

The musicians had laid their instruments around the pedestal at his feet and the brass glittered like gold in the sun.

The receding semi-circle of the station building spread in heavy marble wings as though wishing to embrace the waiting throng. From the port came the laboured breathing of the steamships, the muffled churning of a propeller in the water, the clanging of chains, whistling and shouting. But the square was still and hot under the broiling sun. On the balconies and at the windows of houses women stood with flowers in their hands and beside them were children looking like flowers in their holiday garb.

As the locomotive rolled whistling into the station the crowd stirred and several crushed hats flew into the air like so many dark birds; the musicians picked up their trumpets, and a few grave, elderly men spruced themselves, hastily stepped forward and turned to face the crowd, speaking excitedly and gesturing to the right and left.

Slowly the crowd parted, clearing a wide passage to the street.

“Whom have they come to meet?”

“The children from Parma!”

There was a strike on in Parma. The employers would not yield, and the workers were in such dire straits that they had decided to send their children to Parma to save them from starvation.

From behind the columns of the station building there appeared a neat procession of little people, half-naked and looking like some queer, shaggy little animals in their ragged garments. They walked hand in hand, five abreast, small,

dusty and tired. Their faces were grave but their eyes shone brightly, and when the musicians struck up the Garibaldi hymn a smile of pleasure flickered over those gaunt, hunger-pinched little faces.

The crowd welcomed the men and women of the future with a deafening shout, banners dipped before them, the brass trumpets blared out, stunning and dazzling the children; somewhat taken aback by this reception, they shrank back for a moment and then suddenly drew themselves up so that they looked taller, coalesced into a mass and from hundreds of throats there rose a single shout:

“Viva Italia!”

“Long live young Parma!” thundered the crowd, rushing toward them.

“Evviva Garibaldi!” shouted the children, as in a grey wedge they cut into the crowd and were engulfed by it.

In the hotel windows and from the roofs of houses handkerchiefs fluttered like white birds, and a shower of flowers and gay, lively shouts poured down on the heads of the crowd below.

Everything took on a festive appearance, everything sprang to life, even the grey marble seemed to blossom out in daubs of bright colour.

The banners waved in the breeze, caps and flowers flew into the air, the tiny heads of the children rose above the heads of the throng, small grimy paws stretched out in greeting sought to catch the flowers and the air resounded with the mighty, unceasing shout:

“Viva il Socialismo!”

“Evviva Italia!”

Nearly all the children were snatched up, some sat perched on the shoulders of the grownups, others were pressed against the broad chests of

stern bewhiskered men; the music was barely audible above the hubbub of shouting and laughter.

Women darted in and out of the crowd picking up the remaining newcomers and shouting to one another:

“You’ll take two, Annita?”

“Yes. And you?”

“Don’t forget one for lame Margaret....”

A feeling of joyous excitement reigned, there were beaming faces and moist kind eyes on all sides, and already some of the strikers’ children were munching bread.

“No one thought of this in our time!” remarked an old man with a beak-like nose and a black cigar between his teeth.

“And how simple it is....”

“Yes. Simple and sensible.”

The old man removed the cigar from his mouth, glanced at its tip and sighed as he shook off the ash. Then noticing two little Parm children—brothers obviously—nearby, he assumed a fierce expression, and while the boys looked on gravely, pushed his hat down over his eyes, spread out his arms and, as the brothers backed away together scowling, suddenly squatted down and crowded like a rooster. The boys roared with laughter, stamping their bare soles on the cobbles; the man rose, straightened his hat, and walked off unsteadily feeling that he had done his duty.

A humpbacked, grey-haired woman, with the face of a witch and wiry grey hairs sprouting on a bony chin, stood at the foot of the statue of Columbus and wept, wiping her reddened eyes with the end of her faded shawl. Dark and ugly, she looked strangely forlorn among the excited throng....

A black-haired young Genoese woman came tripping along, leading by the hand a young man of about seven wearing clogs and a grey hat so large that it reached down almost to his shoulders. He tossed his little head to shake the hat back from his eyes but it kept slipping forward on to his face until the woman swept it off and waved it in the air, laughing and singing; the child, his face wreathed in smiles, threw back his head to look, then jumped up to catch the hat as both disappeared from view.

A tall man with powerful bare arms wearing a leather apron carried a little girl of six on his shoulder, a grey mousey little thing.

"See what I mean?" he remarked to the woman who walked beside him leading a small boy with flaming red hair. "If this sort of thing takes root... it won't be easy to get the better of us, eh?"

And with a deep laugh of triumph he threw his little burden up into the blue air, crying:

"Evviva Parma-a!"

The people gradually dispersed carrying the children or leading them by the hand until the square was empty of all save the crumpled flowers, candy wrappers, a group of jolly facchini and over them the noble figure of the man who discovered the New World.

And the happy shouts of the people going forward to a new life echoed through the streets like the flourish of great trumpets.

THE TUNNEL

The calm blue lake is set in a frame of tall mountains crested by eternal snows. The dark tracery of gardens undulates in luxurious folds

down to the water's edge. White houses that seem built of sugar gaze into the water and the stillness is like the gentle slumber of a child.

It is morning. The scent of flowers is wafted sweetly from the hills. The sun has just risen, and the dew-drops still glisten on the leaves of the trees and the blades of grass. The road is a grey ribbon flung into the silent mountain gorge, the road is paved with stones, yet it seems as if it must be soft as velvet to the touch.

Beside a heap of rubble sits a worker, as black as a beetle; his face expresses courage and kindness and he wears a medal on his chest.

Resting his bronzed hands on his knees, he looks up into the face of the passer-by who stands under a chestnut tree.

"This medal, signor," he says, "is for my work on the Simplon Tunnel."

And looking down, he smiles gently at the shining piece of metal on his chest.

"Yes, all work is hard until it gets into your bones and you learn to love it, and then it stirs you and ceases to be hard. But, of course, it wasn't easy!"

He shook his head slightly, smiling at the sun; then, livening up suddenly, he waved his hand and his black eyes glistened.

"Sometimes it was a bit frightening. Even the earth must feel something, don't you think? When we burrowed in deep, cutting a great gash into the mountainside, the earth inside there met us in anger. Its breath was hot, and our hearts sank, our heads grew heavy and our bones ached. Many have experienced the same thing! Then it hurled stones at us and doused us with hot water. That was awful! Sometimes when the light struck it, the water would turn red, and my father would

say that we had wounded the earth and that it would drown and scorch us all with its blood! That was sheer imagination, of course, but when you hear such talk deep down inside the earth, in the suffocating darkness with the water dripping mournfully and the iron grating against the stone, everything seems possible. It was all so fantastic there, signor. We men seemed so puny compared with that mountain reaching up to the clouds, the mountain into whose bowels we were drilling... you would understand what I mean if you had seen it, seen the yawning gap we little men had made in the mountainside, seen us entering through that gap at dawn and the sun looking sadly after us as we burrowed into the earth's bowels; seen the machines, the gloomy face of the mountain, heard the heavy rumble deep within and the echo of the explosions sounding like the laughter of a madman."

He examined his hands, straightened the metal tab on his blue overall and sighed faintly.

"Men know how to work!" he continued with pride. "Ah, signor, man, small as he is, can be an invincible force when he wants to work. And, believe me, man puny as he is can do anything he sets out to do. My father didn't believe that at first.

"To cut through a mountain from one country to another," he used to say, "is defying God who divided land by walls of mountains. You'll see, the Madonna will forsake us!" He was mistaken, the Madonna never forsakes men who love her. Later on father came to think almost as I did, because he felt bigger and stronger than the mountain, but there was a time when he would sit at table on feast days with a bottle of wine in front of him and lecture me and the others.

“‘Children of God,’ that was one of his favourite expressions, for he was a good, God-fearing man, ‘children of God’, he would say, ‘you can’t fight the earth that way, she will take revenge for her wounds and will remain unvanquished! You will see: we shall bore our way right to the heart of the mountain and when we touch it, we shall be hurled into the flames, because the heart of the earth is fire, everyone knows that! To till the earth is one thing, to help Nature with her birth pangs is man’s duty, but to disfigure her face or her form—that we dare not do. See, the farther we bore into the mountain, the hotter becomes the air and the harder it is to breathe....”

The man laughed softly, twirling his moustaches with his fingers.

“He wasn’t the only one who thought thus, and indeed it was true: the farther we advanced, the hotter it grew, and more and more of us took ill and died. The hot springs gushed in ever more powerful streams, chunks of earth tore loose, and two of our men from Lugano went insane. At night in the barracks many would rave in delirium, groan and leap from their beds in a fit of horror....

“‘Was I not right?’ father said. There was terror in his eyes and his cough grew worse and worse.... ‘Was I not right?’ he said. ‘You can’t defeat Nature!’

“And finally he took to his bed never to rise again. He was a sturdy old man, my father, and he battled with death for more than three weeks, stubbornly, uncomplainingly, like a man who knows his worth.

“‘My work is done, Paolo,’ he said to me one night. ‘Take care of yourself and go home, and may the Madonna be with you!’ Then he was

silent for a long time, and lay there breathing heavily with his eyes closed."

The man rose to his feet, glanced up at the mountains and stretched himself so that his sinews cracked.

"Then he took me by the hand and drew me close to him and said—God's truth, signor!—'Do you know, Paolo, my son, I think that it will be done just the same: We and those who are boring from the other side will meet within the mountain, we shall meet, you believe that, don't you, Paolo?' Yes, I believed it. 'That is well, my son! A man must always believe in what he is doing, he must be confident of success and have faith in God who, thanks to the Madonna's prayers, helps good works. I beseech you, son, if it should happen, if the men meet inside the mountain, come to my grave and say: Father, it is done! Then I shall know!'

"It was good, signor, and I promised him. He died five days later. Two days before his death he asked me and the others to bury him on the spot where he had worked inside the tunnel, he begged us to do it, but I think he must have been raving.

"We and those others who were moving toward us from the other side met in the mountain thirteen weeks after my father's death. Oh, that was a mad day, signor, that day when down there in the dark underground, we heard the first sounds of that other work, the sounds made by those coming to meet us in the bowels of the earth, signor, beneath the tremendous weight of earth that could have crushed us little men, all of us, with one blow!

"For many days we heard these sounds, hollow sounds that grew louder and more distinct from day to day, and the wild joy of victors possessed

us, we worked like fiends, like evil spirits, and felt no weariness, needed no urging. Ah, it was good, like dancing on a sunny day, it was, I swear to you! And we all became as kind and gentle as children. Ah, if you but knew how powerful, how passionate is the desire to meet other men in the darkness underground where you have been burrowing like a mole for many long months!"

His face flushed with excitement at the recollection. He came closer and, gazing deeply with his profoundly human eyes into those of his listener, he continued in a soft, happy voice:

"And when finally the last intervening layer of earth crumbled and the bright yellow flame of the torch lit up the opening and we saw a black face streaming with tears of joy and more torches and faces behind it, shouts of victory thundered, shouts of joy—oh, that was the happiest day of my life, and when I recall it I feel that my life has not been in vain! That was work, my work, holy work, signor, I tell you! And when we emerged into the sunlight many of us fell to the ground and pressed our lips to it, weeping; it was as wonderful as a fairy tale! Yes, we kissed the vanquished mountain, kissed the earth; and that day I felt closer to the earth than I had ever been, signor, I loved it as one loves a woman!"

"Of course, I went to my father's grave. I know that the dead cannot hear anything, but I went just the same, for one must respect the wishes of those who laboured for us and who suffered no less than we did, is that not so?"

"Yes, yes, I went to his grave, knocked at the earth with my foot and said as he had bade me:

"'Father, it is done!' I said. 'We men have conquered. It is done, father!'"

THE MOTHER OF A TRAITOR

One can talk endlessly about Mothers.

For several weeks enemy hosts had surrounded the city in a tight ring of steel; by night fires were lit and the flames peered through the inky blackness at the walls of the city like a myriad of red eyes—they blazed malevolently, and their menacing glare evoked gloomy thoughts within the beleaguered city.

From the walls they saw the enemy noose draw tighter; saw the dark shadows hovering about the fires, and heard the neighing of well-fed horses, the clanging of weapons, the loud laughter and singing of men confident of victory—and what can be more jarring to the ear than the songs and laughter of the enemy?

The enemy had thrown corpses into all the streams that fed water to the city, they had burned down the vineyards around the walls, trampled the fields, cut down the orchards—the city was now exposed on all sides, and nearly every day the cannon and muskets of the enemy showered it with lead and iron.

Detachments of war-weary, half-starved soldiers trooped sullenly through the narrow streets of the city; from the windows of houses issued the groans of the wounded, the cries of the delirious, the prayers of women and the wailing of children. People spoke in whispers, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, tensely alert: was that not the enemy advancing?

Worst of all were the nights; in the nocturnal stillness the groans and cries were more distinctly audible; black shadows crept stealthily from the gorges of the distant mountains towards the half-demolished walls, hiding the enemy camp from view, and over the black ridges of the mountains

rose the moon like a lost shield dented by sword blows.

And the people in the city, despairing of succour, worn out by toil and hunger, their hope of salvation waning from day to day, the people in the city stared in horror at that moon, at the sharp-toothed ridges of the mountains, the black maws of the gorges and the noisy camp of the enemy. Everything spoke to them of death, and not a star was there in the sky to give them consolation.

They were afraid to light the lamps in the houses, and a heavy darkness enveloped the streets, and in this darkness, like a fish stirring in the depths of a river, a woman draped from head to foot in a black cloak moved soundlessly.

When they saw her, people whispered to one another:

“Is it she?”

“It is she!”

And they withdrew into the niches under archways, or hurried past her with lowered heads. The patrol chiefs warned her sternly:

“Abroad again, Monna Marianna? Take care, you may be killed and nobody will bother to search for the culprit....”

She drew herself up and stood waiting, but the patrols passed by, either not daring or else scorning to raise their hand against her; the armed men avoided her like a corpse, and, left alone in the darkness, she continued her solitary wanderings from street to street, soundless and black like the incarnation of the city’s misfortune, while all about her, as though pursuing her, melancholy sounds issued from the night: the groans, cries, prayers and the sullen murmur of soldiers who had lost all hope of victory.

A citizen and a mother, she thought of her son

and her country: for at the head of the men who were destroying her town was her son, her gay, handsome, heartless son. Yet, not so long ago she had looked upon him with pride, regarding him as her precious gift to her country, a beneficent force she had brought forth to aid the people of the city where she herself had been born, where her son had been born and reared. Her heart was bound by hundreds of invisible threads to these ancient stones with which her forefathers had built their homes and raised the walls of the city; to the soil wherein lay buried the bones of her kinsfolk, to the legends, the songs and the hopes of the people. And now this heart had lost a loved one and it wept. She weighed in her heart as on scales her love for her son and her love for her native city, and she could not tell which weighed the more.

And so she wandered thus by night through the streets, and many, failing to recognise her, drew back in fear, mistaking her black figure for the incarnation of Death that was so near to all of them, and when they did recognise her, they turned silently away from the mother of a traitor.

But one day in a remote corner by the city walls she saw another woman, kneeling beside a corpse, so still that she seemed part of the earth. The woman was praying, her grief-stricken face upturned to the stars. And on the wall overhead the sentries spoke in low tones, their weapons grating against the stone.

The traitor's mother asked:

“Your husband?”

“No.”

“Your brother?”

“My son. My husband was killed thirteen days ago, my son today.”

And rising from her knees, the mother of the slain man said humbly:

"The Madonna sees all and knows all, and I am grateful to her!"

"For what?" asked the first, and the other replied:

"Now that he has died honourably fighting for his country I can say that I feared for him: he was lighthearted, too fond of revelry and I feared that he might betray his city, as did the son of Marianna, the enemy of God and Man, the leader of our foes, may he be accursed and the womb that bore him!"

Marianna covered her face and went on her way. The next morning she appeared before the city's defenders and said:

"My son has come to be your enemy. Either kill me or open the gates that I may go to him...."

They replied:

"You are a human being, and your country must be precious to you; your son is as much an enemy to you as to each one of us."

"I am his mother. I love him and feel that I am to blame for what he has become!"

Then they took counsel with one another and decided:

"It would not be honourable to kill you for the sins of your son. We know that you could not have led him to commit this terrible sin, and we can understand your distress. But the city does not need you even as a hostage; your son cares nought for you, we believe that he has forgotten you, fiend that he is, and there is your punishment if you think you have deserved it! We believe that is more terrible than death itself!"

"Yes," she said. "It is indeed more terrible."

And so they opened the gates and suffered her

to leave the city and watched long from the battlements as she departed from her native soil, now drenched with the blood her son had spilt. She walked slowly, for her feet were reluctant to tear themselves away from this soil, and she bowed to the corpses of the city's defenders, kicking aside a broken weapon in disgust, for all weapons are abhorrent to mothers, save those that protect life.

She walked as though she carried a precious phial of water beneath her cloak and feared to spill a drop; and as her figure grew smaller and smaller to those who watched from the city wall, it seemed to them that with her went their dejection and hopelessness.

They saw her pause halfway and throwing back the hood of her cloak turn back and gaze long at the city. And over in the enemy's camp they saw her alone in the field and figures dark as her own approached her cautiously. They approached and inquired who she was and whence she had come.

"Your leader is my son," she said, and not one of the soldiers doubted it. They fell in beside her singing his praises, saying how clever and brave he was, and she listened to them with head proudly raised, showing no surprise, for her son could not be otherwise.

And now, at last, she stood before him whom she had known nine months before his birth, him whom she had never felt apart from her own heart. In silk and velvet he stood before her, his weapons studded with precious stones. All was as it should be, thus had she seen him so many times in her dreams—rich, famous and admired.

"Mother!" he said, kissing her hands. "Thou hast come to me, thou art with me, and tomorrow I shall capture that accursed city!"

"The city where thou wert born," she reminded him.

Intoxicated with his prowess, crazed with the thirst for more glory, he answered her with the arrogant heat of youth:

"I was born into the world and for the world, and I mean to make the world quake with wonder of me! I have spared this city for thy sake, it has been like a thorn in my flesh and has retarded my swift rise to fame. But now tomorrow I shall smash that nest of obstinate fools!"

"Where every stone knows and remembers thee as a child," she said.

"Stones are dumb, unless man makes them speak. Let the mountains speak of me, that is what I wish!"

"And what of men?" she asked.

"Ah yes, I have not forgotten them, mother. I need them too, for only in men's memory are heroes immortal!"

She said:

"A hero is he who creates life in defiance of death, who conquers death...."

"No!" he objected. "The destroyer is as glorious as the builder of a city. See, we do not know who it was that built Rome—Aeneas or Romulus—yet we know well the name of Alaric and the other heroes who destroyed the city...."

"Which outlived all names," the mother reminded him.

Thus they conversed until the sun sank to rest; less and less frequently did she interrupt his wild speech, lower and lower sank her proud head.

A Mother creates, she protects, and to speak to her of destruction means to speak against her; but he did not know this, he did not know that he was negating her reason for existence.

A Mother is always opposed to death; the hand that brings death into the homes of men, is hateful and abhorrent to Mothers. But the son did not perceive this, for he was blinded by the cold glitter of glory that deadens the heart.

Nor did he know that a Mother can be as clever and ruthless as she is fearless, when the life she creates and cherishes is in question.

She sat with bowed head, and through the opening in the leader's richly appointed tent she saw the city where first she had felt the sweet tremor of life within her and the anguished convulsions of the birth of this child who now thirsted for destruction.

The crimson rays of the sun dyed the walls and towers of the city blood-red, cast a baleful glare on the windowpanes so that the whole city seemed to be a mass of wounds with the crimson sap of life flowing from each gash. Presently the city turned black as a corpse and the stars shone above it like funeral candles.

She saw the dark houses where people feared to light candles so as not to attract the attention of the enemy, saw the streets steeped in gloom and rank with the stench of corpses, heard the muffled whispers of people awaiting death—she saw it all, all that was near and dear to her stood before her dumbly awaiting her decision, and she felt herself the mother of all those people in her city.

Clouds descended from the black peaks into the valley and swooped down like winged steeds upon the doomed city.

"We may attack tonight," said her son, "if the night is dark enough! It is hard to kill when the sun shines in your eyes and the glitter of the weapons blinds you, many a blow goes awry," he remarked, examining his sword.

The mother said to him:

"Come, my son, lay thy head on my breast and rest, remember how gay and kind thou wer' as a child, and how everyone loved thee...."

He obeyed her, laid his head in her lap and closed his eyes, saying:

"I love only glory and I love thee for having made me as I am."

"And women?" she asked bending over him.

"They are many, one tires of them as of everything that is too sweet."

"And dost thou not desire children?" she asked finally.

"What for? That they might be killed? Someone like me will kill them; that will give me pain and I shall be too old and feeble to avenge them."

"Thou art handsome, but as barren as a streak of lightning," she said with a sigh.

"Yes, like lightning..." he replied, smiling.

And he dozed there on his mother's breast like a child.

Then, covering him with her black cloak, she plunged a knife into his heart, and with a shudder he died, for who knew better than she where her son's heart beat. And, throwing his corpse at the feet of the astonished sentries, she said addressing the city:

"As a Citizen, I have done for my country all I could: as a Mother I remain with my son! It is too late for me to bear another, my life is of no use to anyone."

And the knife, still warm with his blood, her blood, she plunged with a firm hand into her own breast, and again she struck true, for an aching heart is not hard to find.

PEPE

Pepe is ten, he is as frail, slender and quick as a lizard, his motley rags hang from his narrow shoulders, and the skin, blackened by sun and dirt, peeps through innumerable rents.

He looks like a dried-up blade of grass, which the sea breeze blows hither and thither. From sunrise to sunset Pepe leaps from stone to stone on the island and hourly one can hear his tireless little voice pouring forth:

*Italy the Beautiful,
Italy my own!*

Everything interests him: the flowers that grow in riotous profusion over the good earth, the lizards that dart among the purple boulders, the birds amid the chiselled perfection of the olive-tree leaves and the malachite tracery of the vines, the fish in the dark gardens at the sea bottom and the foreigners on the narrow, crooked streets of the town: the fat German with the sword-scarred face, the Englishman who always reminds one of an actor in the role of a misanthrope, the American who endeavours in vain to look like an Englishman, and the inimitable Frenchman as noisy as a rattle.

“What a face!” Pepe remarks to his playmates, with his keen eyes at the German who is so puffed out with importance that his very hair seems to stand on end. “Why, he’s got a face as big as my belly!”

Pepe doesn’t like Germans, he shares the ideas and sentiments of the streets, the squares and the dark little saloons where the townsfolk drink wine, play cards, read the papers and discuss politics.

“The Balkan Slavs,” they say, “are much closer

to us poor southerners than our good allies who presented us with the sands of Africa in reward for our friendship."

The simple folk of the south are saying this more and more often and Pepe hears everything and forgets nothing.

Here is a dull Englishman, striding along on his scissor-like legs. Pepe in front of him is humming something like a funeral dirge or just a mournful ditty:

*My friend has died,
My wife is sad...
And I do not know
What ails her.*

Pepe's playmates trail along behind convulsed with laughter, scurrying like mice to hide in the bushes or behind walls whenever the foreigner glances at them calmly with his faded eyes.

One could tell a host of entertaining stories abour Pepe.

One day some signora sent him to her friend with a basket of apples from her garden.

"I will give you a soldo!" she said. "You can well use it."

Pepe readily picked up the basket, balanced it on his head and set off. Not until evening did he return for the soldo.

"You were in no great hurry," the woman remarked.

"Ah, dear signora, but I am so tired!" Pepe replied with a sigh. "You see there were more than ten of them!"

"Why, of course, there were more than ten! It was a full basket!"

"Not apples, signora, boys."

"But what about the apples?"

"First the boys, signora: Michele, Giovanni...."

The woman grew angry. She seized Pepe by the shoulder and shook him:

"Answer me, did you deliver the apples?" she cried.

"I carried them all the way to the square, signora! Listen how well I behaved. At first I paid no attention to their jibes. Let them compare me to a donkey, I told myself, I will endure it all out of respect for the signora, for you, signora. But when they began to poke fun at my mother, I decided I had had enough. I put the basket down and you ought to have seen, good signora, how neatly I pelted those little devils with those apples. You would have enjoyed it!"

"They stole my fruit!" cried the woman.

Pepe heaved a mournful sigh.

"Oh, no," he said, "the apples that missed were smashed against the wall, but the rest we ate after I had beaten my enemies and made peace with them...."

The woman loosed a flood of abuse on Pepe's small shaven head. He listened attentively and humbly, clicking his tongue now and again in admiration at some particularly choice expression. "Oho, that's a beauty! What a language!"

And when at last her anger had spent itself and she left him, he shouted after her:

"You wouldn't have felt that way if you saw how beautifully I swatted the filthy heads of those good-for-nothings with those wonderful apples of yours. If only you could have seen it, why, you'd have given me two soldi instead of one!"

The silly woman did not understand the modest pride of the victor, she merely shook her fist at him.

Pepe's sister who was much older, but not smarter than he, went to work as housemaid in a villa owned by a rich American. Her appearance altered at once; she became neat and tidy, her cheeks became rosy, and she began to bloom and ripen like a pear in August.

"Do you really eat every day?" her brother once asked her.

"Twice and three times a day if I wish," she replied proudly.

"See you don't wear out your teeth," Pepe advised.

"Is your master very wealthy?" he inquired after a pause.

"Oh, yes, I believe he is richer than the king!"

"You can't fool me! How many pairs of trousers has he got?"

"Hard to say."

"Ten?"

"More, perhaps...."

"Then bring me a pair, not too long in the leg but the warmest you can find," said Pepe.

"What for?"

"Well, just look at mine!"

There was indeed not much to see, for little enough remained of Pepe's trousers.

"Yes," his sister agreed, "you really need some clothes! But won't he think we have stolen them?"

"Don't imagine that folks are sillier than we are!" Pepe reassured her. "When you take a little from someone who has a lot, that isn't stealing, it's just sharing."

"You're talking nonsense," his sister objected, but Pepe soon overcame her scruples and when she came into the kitchen with a good pair of light-grey trousers, which were, of course, far too large for Pepe, he knew at once how to overcome that difficulty.

"Give me a knife!" he said.

Together they quickly converted the American's trousers into a very convenient costume for the boy; the result of their efforts was a somewhat loose, baggy but not uncomfortable sack attached to the shoulders by bits of string that could be tied around the neck, with the trouser pockets serving as sleeves.

They might have turned out an even better and more convenient garment had the wife of the owner of the trousers not interrupted their labours. She came into the kitchen and began to give vent to a string of very ugly words in many languages, pronounced equally badly, as is customary with Americans.

Pepe could do nothing to check the flow of eloquence; he frowned, pressed his hand to his heart, clutched despairingly at his head and sighed loudly, but she did not calm down until her husband appeared on the scene.

"What's up?" he asked.

Whereupon Pepe spoke up:

"Signor, I am greatly astonished by the commotion your signora has raised, in fact I am somewhat offended for your sake. As far as I can see she thinks that we have spoiled the trousers, but I assure you that they are just right for me! She seems to think that I have taken your last pair of trousers and that you cannot buy yourself another pair...."

The American, who had listened imperturbably to the speech, now remarked:

"And I think, young man, that I ought to call the police."

"Really," Pepe queried in amazement, "what for?"

"To take you to jail...."

Pepe was extremely hurt. In fact, he was ready

to weep, but he swallowed his tears and said with great dignity:

“If, signor, it gives you pleasure to send people to jail, that is your affair! But I would not do that if I had many pairs of trousers and you had none! I would give you two, perhaps even three pairs; although it is impossible to wear three pairs of trousers at once! Especially in hot weather....”

The American burst out laughing, for even rich men can sometimes see a joke. Then he treated Pepe to some chocolate and gave him a franc piece. Pepe bit at the coin and thanked the donor:

“Thank you, signor! The coin is genuine, I presume?”

But Pepe is at his best when he stands alone somewhere among the rocks, pensively examining their cracks as if reading the dark history of rock life. At such moments his vivid eyes are dilated and filmy with wonder, his slender hands are laced behind his back and his head, slightly bent, sways a little from side to side like a flower in the breeze. And under his breath he softly hums a tune, for he is for ever singing.

It is good also to watch him looking at flowers, at the wistaria blossoms that pour in purple profusion over the walls. He stands as taut as a violin string as if he were listening to the soft tremor of the silken petals stirred by the breath of the sea breeze.

As he looks he sings: “Fiorino... Fiorino....”

And from afar, like the sound of some huge tambourine, come the muffled sighs of the sea. Butterflies chase one another over the flowers. Pepe raises his head and follows their flight, blinking in the sunlight, his lips parted in a smile tinged a little with envy and sadness, yet the generous smile of a superior being on earth.

"Cho!" he cries, clapping his hands to frighten an emeral lizard.

And when the sea is as placid as a mirror and the rocks are bare of the white lacy spume of the tide, Pepe, seated on a stone, gazes with his bright eyes into the transparent water where among the reddish seaweed the fish glide smoothly, the shrimps dart back and forth and the crab crawls along sideways. And in the stillness the clear voice of the boy pours gently forth over the azure waters:

"Sea, oh, Sea...."

Adults often shake their heads disapprovingly at Pepe, saying: "That one will be an anarchist!"

But kinder folk, possessed of greater discernment, are of a different opinion:

"Pepe will be our poet...."

And Pasqualino, the cabinet-maker, an old man with a head that seems cast in silver and a face like those etched on ancient Roman coins—wise and respected Pasqualino has his own opinion:

"Our children will be far better than we, and their lives will be better too!"

Many folk believe him.

THE ICE IS MOVING*

On the river opposite the town seven carpenters were hastily mending a starling from which, during the course of the winter, the inhabitants of the outlying settlements had stripped the planks for firewood.

Spring was late that year—young and lusty March had more than a look of October about him; only towards midday and not every day at that—in a sky netted with pale light a white, wintry sun would appear and go diving in and out of the clear, blue puddles between the clouds, squinting down upon the earth with scant favour.

It was Good Friday already and in the night the thaw drops had frozen into blue icicles a foot long; the ice on the river, almost bare of snow, was a bluish colour too, like the wintry clouds.

The carpenters worked on but in the town the copper bells were ringing a mournful summons. The heads of the workers would come up and their eyes drown thoughtfully in the greyish dusk which wrapped the town, and often the axe raised for the next blow would pause indecisively in mid-air as though fearing to cut across the caressing sound of the bells.

Here and there over the wide strip of the river, pine branches were stuck crookedly into the ice to mark the road and any faults or cracks in the

* The action of this story takes place in 1883-84, when Gorky worked as a foreman for the contractor V. S. Sergeyev in Nizhni-Novgorod.—*Ed*

ice; they clawed upwards like the arms of a drowning man writhen with cramp.

The river exhaled an aching melancholy: deserted, covered with porous scabs, it lay like a straight road without hope or promise of comfort leading to some murky region from which, weakly and cheerlessly, a cold wind blew.

...The foreman Osip, a cleanly, well-built little man with a tidy silver beard, neatly curling in tight rings on his rosy cheeks and supple neck, always and everywhere in the limelight, the foreman Osip shouted:

“Get a move on.”

Turning to me, he added on a note of ironic exhortation:

“Inspector, what are you poking that blunt nose of yours up into the sky for? What job was it you were wished onto us for, I’m asking you? You’re from the contractor, Vasily Sergeyevich? In that case—it’s up to you to egg us on—put your backs into it, you blankety-blanks, you! That’s the great task you’ve been allotted, and you’re turning a blind eye on your duty, my lad, you rotted piece o’ standing timber. You’ve not the right to turn a blind eye, you ought to keep your eyes open and give the boys the rough side of your tongue if you’ve been sent to get work out of us.... Use your authority, you cuckoo’s egg!”

Again he shouted at the lads:

“Keep at it, you devils—have we got to finish the work today, or haven’t we?”

He himself was the greatest slacker in the artel. He knew the work splendidly and knew how to work skilfully, speedily, with good taste and real interest, but—he did not like to bestir himself and was always coming out with spell-binding stories. Just as the work had really got under

way, when the men had become thoroughly absorbed and were working in silence, quite concentrated, suddenly inspired with the wish to do their work go well and smoothly, Osip would pipe up in his liquid voice:

“And you know, mates, it once happened....”

For two or three minutes it would seem as though the men were not listening, selflessly continuing to hew, to plane, to wield their axes, but his soft, light tenor would flow dreamily on and gradually enmesh their attention. Osip’s clear, light-blue eyes would narrow sweetly, he would twist his curly beard in his fingers and, smacking his lips with pleasure, string word upon word....

“So he caught that tench, put it in his basket and went off through the forest thinking: well, that’ll make me a grand fish soup.... When, suddenly, there was no telling from where, a woman’s voice called out, small and shrill: Yelesya-a, Yelesya-a....”

By this time, the tall, raw-boned Mordvinian Lyonka, nick-named the Native—a young fellow with small, bemused eyes—had already lowered his axe and was standing still with his mouth open.

“And out of the basket a rich bass voice answered: Here-ere! And at that very moment the lid of the basket sprang open; the tench was out in one great leap and off and away, away back to his deep....”

The old soldier Sanyavin, a dour drunkard who suffered from asthma and had apparently at some time undergone injury which had left him with a permanent grudge against life in general, put in hoarsely:

“How was it that tench crossed over the dryland if he was a fish?”

"And is it so usual for a fish to talk?" Osip asked sweetly.

Mokey Budyrin, a dull peasant with a face like a dog's—the cheekbones and jawbones thrust forward, the forehead receding—a silent and undistinguished person, unhurriedly enunciated through his nose his three favourite words:

"You're right there."

Every time that anyone told of something wonderful, terrible, dirty or evil, he used to respond with this quiet but unshakeably convinced:

"You're right there."

And it was as though he had struck me three times under the heart with his cruel, heavy fist.

All work had come to a stop because Yakov Boyev, clumsy of tongue and bent of body, had also been visited by the urge to tell a fishy story and was already well under way, only no one would believe him and his awkward speech made them all laugh; he swore, he called on the Almighty to be his witness, he stabbed angrily at the air with his chisel and, spluttering spiteful saliva, shouted, to the amusement of all:

"One telling such whoppers you wouldn't ... and they believe him, and here am I telling you God's truth and you laugh like jack-asses, damn and blast you. . . ."

All the men left their work and joined in the general hubbub, waving empty hands; at this point Osip took off his cap, baring his venerable silver head with the bald patch, and cried sternly:

"That's enough, now! You've made your noise, you've had your rest and—that'll do!"

"You started it," wheezed the soldier, spitting on his palms. At moments like this Osip would turn to me:

"Inspector-r. . . ."

It seemed to me as though he had some specific

aim in view in distracting the men's attention from their work with his yarns, but I could not make out whether it was that he intended to cloak his own laziness under this tongue-wagging or to give them a rest? Osip's attitude to the contractor was one of ingratiating servility, he "played the fool" for his benefit and, every Saturday, succeeded in extracting something "for a cup o' tea" for his artel.

On the whole he was a good artel man, but the old hands disliked him, considering him a clown and a loafer and treating him with scant respect, and the young, too, though they enjoyed listening to his yarns, did not take him seriously and looked on him with ill-concealed, often resentful distrust.

The Mordvinian, a literate lad with whom I sometimes had heart-to-heart talks, when I asked him his opinion of Osip, answered with a grin:

"Not know... the devil, 'ee knows... all right, I suppose—not bad...."

And added after due pause for thought:

"Mikhailo who died was a sharp-tongued man, clever—and once 'ee had a quarrel with 'im, with Osip I mean, and 'ee say: 'Do you think'—'ee say —'you are a real man? The worker in you 'as kicked the bucket and the boss 'as not been born, and so—'ee says—you'll be left dangling all your life in a corner like a forgotten plummet on a string....' That, perhaps, was true enough."

But, after another pause for thought, the Mordvinian added uneasily:

"But on the 'ole, 'ee's all right, a kind man...."

My position amongst these men was ridiculous in the extreme: at fifteen years of age I had been put in by the contractor to keep accounts of the expenditure of materials and to see that the carpenters did not steal the nails or trade in planks

at the inn. Nails they continued to steal, supremely unembarrassed by my presence, and all were eager to show me that I was a superfluous and unpleasant member of their company. If any of them saw the opportunity to give me an unobtrusive bang with a plank or to cause me some other minor vexation—they would take advantage of it very skilfully.

I felt ill-at-ease, ashamed; I wanted to say something which would reconcile them to me, but I could not find the right words and I was crushed by the dismal conviction of my own uselessness.

Every time that I noted down the quantity of materials received in my book Osip would saunter across to me and enquire:

“Done your drawing? Come along now, show us....”

He would look at the entry with narrowed eyes and say vaguely:

“Small writing you’ve got....”

He was only able to read printed letters and to write in ecclesiastical capitals—lay handwriting with joined-up letters was beyond him.

“That—squiggle there—what word is that?”

“Goods.”

“Goo-ooods! Looks more like a lasso to me.... And what’s that line?”

“One and three-quarter inch planks twenty feet long—five.”

“Six.”

“Five.”

“How do you mean, five? The soldier there has sawn one in half....”

“He shouldn’t have done, there was no need....”

“What do you mean, no need? He took half to trade in at the pub....”

Looking serenely into my face with cornflour-blue eyes in whose depths there lurked a malicious, merry sparkle, he twisted his beard into ringlets round and round his finger and said with irresistible shamelessness:

“Put in six, do now! Just look, cuckoo’s egg, it’s such damp, cold, hard work—people have to cheer themselves up every now and again, warm the heart with a little wine? Don’t you be too strict, you’ll never get round God by being strict....”

He spoke at length, caressingly, flowerily, the words sprinkling over me in a cloud like sawdust, and it was as though my conscience were blinded and, silently, I showed him the corrected figure.

“There we are, now—that’s right! And the figure looks better, too, sitting there like a merchant’s wife, all plump and good-hearted....”

I saw how triumphantly he told the carpenters of his success, aware that they all despised me for yielding, my fifteen-year-old heart weeping for the humiliation of it and dull, grey thoughts buzzing round and round in my head:

“How strange and stupid all this is. Why is he so sure that I will not change the 6 back to a 5 again and tell the contractor that they have sawn up one of the planks.”

Once they stole two pounds of 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wooden spikes and iron cramps.

“Listen,” I warned Osip. “I can’t let that by.”

“All right,” he agreed, his grey brows working. “It really is going a bit far, isn’t it? Go on, note them down, they’re a bad bit....”

And shouted to the men:

“Hey, you bad lads, the spikes and cramps are being entered for a fine.”

The soldier enquired gloomily:

“Why for?”

“You must have done something to deserve it,” explained Osip calmly.

The carpenters began to grumble, giving me dirty looks, and I myself was not convinced that I would do what I had threatened and whether, if I did, it would be the right thing.

“I shall leave the contractor,” I said to Osip. “To hell with you all! You’ll make a thief out of me”

Osip thought for a moment, stroking his beard, sat down next to me shoulder to shoulder and said quietly:

“That’s true!”

“What?”

“You should leave. What kind of an inspector do you think you are, what kind of an overseer? In jobs like that you have to understand the meaning of property, you have to have a watchdog nature in order to guard your master’s belongings as you would your own skin, what your mother left you in her will.... And for a job like that—you’re too young a whelp, you haven’t the feel of property nor of what’s owing to it. If anyone were to tell Vasily Sergeyevich how easy you are on us he’d have you out on your ear that very moment without hesitation! Because you’re not saving him money, you’re losing him money, and an employee ought to bring his master profit. See?”

Rolling a cigarette, he handed it to me.

“Have a smoke, your brain’ll clear. If you hadn’t such a nosy, argumentative character I’d tell you to go and be a monk. But—your character isn’t suited to that, it’s a rough character, never been papered down and polished, why, you’d even hold out against an abbot. A monk, now, he’s like a jack-daw: doesn’t mind whose grain

he's pecking, the roots of the matter are no business of his, he's full from the grain, not from the root. I'm telling you all this from my heart, just to show you that you're not the sort of fellow to get mixed up in this sort of business, you're a cuckoo's egg dropped in the wrong nest."

He took off his cap—something he always did when he wished to say anything particularly solemn, looked into the grey sky and said loudly, humbly:

"In the eyes of the Lord we are thieves indeed and we may not look to Him for salvation. . . ."

"You're right there," Mokey Budyrin responded, his voice ringing like a clarionet.

From that time on, silver-haired, curly-headed Osip of the clear eyes and the misty soul had acquired a pleasant kind of fascination for me, something resembling friendship had arisen between us, but I could see that for some reason his kindness for me embarrassed him; when the others were there he would pay no attention to me, his beady, cornflower-blue eyes pale and empty, darting hither and thither, wavering, and his lip would curl, falsely, unpleasantly, when he came up to me and jeered.

"Hey, keep your eyes open, earn your bread, just look over there—the soldier's chewing nails, the hog. . . ."

When alone with me, though, he spoke like a gentle mentor, in his eyes would gleam a wise little sparkle of irony and he would direct their blue beams straight into my eyes. I lent an attentive ear to this man's words, for they seemed to me to have truth in them, to have been honestly weighed in his mind, even though sometimes the things he said were strange.

"To be a good man—that's all that matters!" I once said.

"Ah—of course!" he agreed, but almost at once his lips twitched ironically and he lowered his eyes, saying quietly:

"Only—what do you mean by a good man? It seems to me that men don't care one way or another about your goodness or your fairness—unless they happen to benefit from them; no, you show them attention, you be like a caress to every heart, you indulge people a little, comfort them... maybe, at some time or another, you'll find it pays! Of course, there's no disputing that its a mighty pleasant occupation, if you're a good man, to sit back and look at yourself in the mirror. But other people—believe me—don't care whether you're a twister or a saint—as long as you keep an open heart and treat people kindly.... That's what they all want!"

I am very attentive in observing people, it seems to me that every person should help me and does help me to an understanding of this incomprehensible, confused, hurtful life and also I have my own gnawing, perpetual question which I ask everybody:

"What is the soul of man?"

It seems to me that some souls are made like copper balls: immutably fixed in the breast, they reflect everything which touches them from their own point of view only—and the reflection is distorted, ugly and dull. Other souls are flat and shallow, like mirrors; they might just as well not be there at all.

The majority of human souls, however, seem to me to lack form altogether, like clouds, and to be shot with many dim colours, like that false stone, the opal, always ready to change submissively according to whatever colour dominates in their immediate proximity.

I did not know, could not make out of what

kind was the soul of the venerable Osip—it evaded me in its cleverness.

It is of all this that I was thinking as I stared out over the river to where the town, clinging to the side of its hill, was pealing with the bells of all its belfries, rising skywards like the white pipes of my beloved organ in the Polish Catholic Church. The crosses on the churches were like tarnished stars captive in the grey sky, flickering and trembling in their longing to rise above the grey veil of wind-wracked clouds into the clean heavens; but the clouds kept drifting up and their shadows wiped out the bright colours of the town—and every time a few rays of sunshine spilled out over the towns from the deep, pale blue openings in the clouds souring it in gay colours, the clouds would come swiftly up to cover the sun and their damp shadows would grow heavier and all the colours would fade, having merely whetted our appetites for a little gaiety.

The houses of the town looked like heaps of dirty snow, the earth beneath them was black and bare, and the trees in the gardens were like heaps of earth; the dull gleam of the windows in the grey walls was reminiscent of winter and all things were gently touched by the sadness of the pale northern spring.

Mishuk Dyatlov, a fair-haired young man with a hare lip, broad and clumsy, made an effort to start a song:

*She came to him, but in the morning,
And he had died the night before....*

“Hey, you son-of-a-bitch,” the soldier yelled at him. “Have you forgotten what day it is today?”

Boyev, too, was angry, shook his fist at Dyatlov and hissed:

“S-soul of a dog!”

"Where I came from the people are a forest people, long lived and tough in fibre," said Osip to Budyrin, straddling the starling and narrowing his eyes to calculate the slant. "Shift the end of that beam an inch or two to the left—so!... Or, to put it more simply—a wild people! Once, making the round of his diocese a bishop came to visit our parish—and they ran to him, surrounded him, fell on their knees, and spilled out all their sorrows: please, your Grace, say us a spell against wolves, the wolves are making life intolerable for us! Oy-oy-oy, how he cursed them.... Ah, you heathens, says he, call yourselves orthodox Christians, do you, eh? Why, he says, I will have you up for heresy! Very wrathful, he was, even spat in their faces. A little old man, a kindly soul, tears in his eyes...."

Some forty yards downstream from the starling, sailors and vagrant odd-jobbers were breaking the ice round a barge; the picks were crunching through the crumbling, blue-grey skin of the river, the slender barge-poles were waving in the air, driving the broken pieces of ice beneath the still unbroken surface, the water was welling up and the murmur of streams sounded from the sandy bank. Where we were working there was a scraping of planes, a whistling of saws, a ringing of axes as they drove the iron cramps into the yellow, smoothly planed wood—and all the sounds were permeated by the pealing of the bells, softened by distance, disturbing the soul. It was as though this grey day in all its business were joining in a service of invocation to the Spring, calling her back to the Earth, already free from snow but bare and destitute.

Someone yelled in a hoarse voice:

"Call the Ge-erman! They haven't enough...."

From the bank came the reply:

“Where is he?”

“In the pub, go and loo-ook. . . .”

The voices floundered heavily in the damp air and drifted mournfully out over the wide river.

The men were working hurriedly, with enthusiasm, but badly, carelessly; they all wanted to get into the town, to the steam baths and to church. Particularly concerned was Sashok Dyatlov, as fair as his brother, as though he had been bleached, but curly-headed, well-made and nimble. Every now and again he would glance up river and say quietly to his brother:

“What d’you think, is it cracking?”

That night there had been a “shift” in the ice, the river police had not been allowing horses on the river since the morning, occasional pedestrians, strung out like beads along the lines of the crossing places, hurried from bank to bank, and you could hear the planks slapping juicily into the water as they bent beneath their weight.

“It is,” answered Mishuk, blinking white lashes.

Osip, shading his eyes with his palm as he looked out over the river, broke in:

“That’s the shavings in your head drying out and creaking! Get on with your work, you witches’ spawn! Inspector—keep them at it, what’ve you buried your nose in your book for?”

There was no more than an hour or two’s work left to do, the whole surface of the starling was already covered with butter-yellow boarding and all that remained was to fix the thick, iron binders. Boyev and Sanyavin had cut out furrows to receive them but they had miscalculated, the furrow was too narrow and the strips of iron would not fit into the wood.

"Blind idiots," cried Osip, clapping his hand to his cap. "Do you call that work?"

Suddenly, from somewhere on the bank a joyful voice rang out:

"It's moving.... Ahoy there!"

And as if in accompaniment to this shout an unhurried whisper, a quiet scraping sound flowed out over the river; the clawing arms of the pine way-markers quivered as though trying to catch at something in the air above them and the sailors and their down-and-out aids, waving their boathooks, clambered noisily up the rope ladders onto the deck of the barge.

It was strange to see how many people were in fact out on the river. They seemed to rise from beneath the ice itself and were now fluttering backwards and forwards like daws scared by a shot, running hither and thither, carrying planks and barge-poles, throwing them down and picking them up again.

"Collect your tools!" yelled Osip. "Quickly, you.... Get ashore."

"There's Christ's Holy Resurrection for you!" exclaimed Sashok ruefully.

It seemed as though the river remained as it had been and it was the town which had suddenly shuddered, wavered and, together with the hill beneath it, begun to float slowly upstream. The grey shoals of sand about twenty metres in front of us also shifted suddenly and began to float away.

"Run," shouted Osip, giving me a shove. "What are you standing there gaping for?"

A thrill of danger passed through me; my legs, feeling the ice moving beneath them, began to spread out in great leaps as if of themselves and transported my body onto the sand amongst the naked shoots of the withies, all broken by the

winter storms, where Boyev, the soldier, Budyrin and both Dyatlovs were already sprawling. The Mordvinian was running alongside me cursing angrily and Osip was coming up behind, shouting:

“Don’t grouse, Native....”

“But, Uncle Osip....”

“The world hasn’t come to an end!”

“We’re stuck here for two or three days....”

“And you’ll have a nice rest....”

“And Easter-day?”

“They’ll celebrate Easter without you this year....”

The soldier, sitting on the sand, lit his pipe and grunted;

“Panicked ... less than thirty metres from the shore and you all go bolting off as if your lives depended on it.”

“You were the first to run,” said Mokey.

But the soldier went on:

“And what were you so afraid of? Even the Lord Christ had to die....”

“All very well, but he rose again afterwards,” muttered the Mordvinian surlily, but Boyev shouted him down:

“Shut your face, you puppy! What do you know of such matters? Rose again! It’s Friday today, not Resurrection Sunday!”

From a blue cleft in the clouds the March sun suddenly blazed forth, the ice sparkled, laughing at us. Osip shaded his eyes with his palm, looked out over the deserted river and said:

“She’s stopped... But it won’t be for long....”

“We’re cut off from the celebrations,” said Sashok glumly.

The beardless, moustacheless face of the Mordvinian, dark and knobby as an unskinned potato,

crinkled up angrily, he blinked rapidly and grumbled:

“And here we are stranded.... Neither bread nor money.... Everyone rejoicing and we are serving Mammon, no better than dogs....”

Osip, without taking his eyes from the river, was obviously thinking of something and said now as if from a long way away:

“You’re not serving Mammon at all, you’re serving necessity! What are these breakers and starlings for? To protect barges and all that from the ice. The ice is foolish, it’ll come down and crush a whole convoy and—farewell to the goods....”

“But what’s that to us. Not ours, are they?”

“Argue with a fool....”

“They should’ve mended it before....”

The soldier screwed up his face into a horrible grimace and shouted:

“Shut up, you bloody Native!”

“It’s stopped,” repeated Osip. “Uhu!”

On the line of barges the sailors were yelling and from the river emanated a breath of cold and a malevolent, waiting stillness. The pattern of the pine branches scattered over the ice had altered and everything appeared to have changed and to be laden with tense expectation.

One of the young lads asked quietly and nervously:

“Uncle Osip—what are we going to do?”

“What did you say?” he answered dreamily.

“Are we going to sit it out here?”

Boyev intoned maliciously through his nose:

“The Lord has seen fit to excommunicate you sinners from His Holy Ta-able.”

The soldier backing up his comrade, made a decisive gesture with his hand towards the river and, with a grunt of laughter, muttered:

“Want to get to town? Go on! And the ice’ll go too. If you’re lucky you’ll drown and, if you don’t, the police’ll get you and give you a nice holiday in jail—just the thing!”

“You’re right there,” said Mokey.

The sun hid behind a cloud, the river grew dark and the town became more clearly visible—the young people stared across at it with angry, aggrieved eyes and fell silent.

I felt dull and sick at heart, as one always does when one sees that all the people around one are pulling in different directions and that there is no singleness of purpose to unite people into a whole, stubborn force. I wanted to leave them and to stride off over the ice on my own.

Osip, as though he had just woken up, got to his feet, took off his cap, crossed himself in the direction of the town and said very simply, calmly and with authority:

“Come on, lads, and may God go with us....”

“To the town?” exclaimed Sashok, leaping up.

The soldier, without moving, announced with conviction:

“We’ll drown!”

“Then—stay.”

And, looking them all over, Osip shouted:

“Get a move on, lads, quickly now!”

They all rose and huddled together. Boyev, straightening out the tools in the basket, began grousing:

“He says ‘Go!’ and go it’ll have to be! Let him who gives the orders take the responsibility....”

Osip seemed to have grown younger, stronger: the rather foxy, ingratiating expression had peeled off his rosy face, the eyes looked darker and were stern and business-like; the lazy, shambling walk had vanished also—his stride had become firm and assured.

"Every man will take a plank and balance it across his body just in case—God forbid—anyone should fall in, the edges of the plank will fall on the ice and give support! And to help cross the cracks.... Rope—is there any? Native, give me the measuring rod.... Ready? Good—I'll go on in front, and behind me—who's the heaviest? You, soldier! Then—Mokey, the Mordvinian, Boyev, Mishuk, Sashok. Maksimych is the lightest, he can come behind.... Off with your caps, pray to the Holy Virgin! And here's good Master Sun come out to meet us...."

With one accord the unkempt grey and brown heads were bared, the sun shone out on them through a fine mesh of cloud and hid itself again, as though not wishing to raise false hopes.

"Come now," Osip said in a new, dry voice. "God go with us! Watch my feet, don't crowd up behind one another, keep intervals of some two yards, the further the better! Come on, children!"

Thrusting his cap into his jacket and holding the measuring rod in one hand, Osip glided cautiously off onto the ice with a curious, caressing shuffle and immediately on the bank behind us sounded a desperate cry.

"Where do you think you're going, you bloody fools...."

"Keep walking, don't look back!" our leader ordered in ringing tones.

"Come back, you devils...."

"Come on, lads, remembering the Lord! We're hardly the company he'll be after inviting to His Celebration...."

A police whistle shrilled out and the Soldier grumbled loudly.

"Heroes, that's what we are, damn our hides.... We have let ourselves in for something

this time! Now they'll warn the police on the other side.... If we don't drown, we're food for bugs in the cells.... I wash my hands of all responsibility...."

Osip's cheerful voice led the men along after him as if on a string.

"Watch your step, now! Keep your eyes down!"

We were walking diagonally against the current and I, as the last, could see clearly how cleverly tidy little Osip, with his white head so like a hare's, slithered over the ice, scarcely raising his feet. After him, single file, as if strung out along an invisible thread, six dark figures trailed uncertainly and sometimes their shadows would alight beside them to lie down at their feet and stretch out over the ice. All heads were down as though the men were climbing mountains and feared that a false step might lead to a fall.

From behind the people were shouting even louder—evidently a great crowd had collected; it was no longer possible to make out the words but an unpleasant roar was still clearly audible.

For me, this cautious advance soon became a boring, mechanical exercise; I was used to walking fast and now I could feel myself sinking into that state between sleeping and waking when the mind becomes a blank, you cease to think about yourself, seem to exist outside your own self and yet, at the same time, you see and hear everything with peculiar clarity and distinctness. Under my feet lay the blue-grey, leaden ice, all eroded by water, its scattered sparkle blinding to the eyes. Here and there the ice was broken, raised in a hump, rubbed into small pieces by the movement of the river, lying in piles porous as pummy-stone and sharp as broken glass. Blue fissures, grinning coldly, caught at our feet. The broad soles of our boots splashed up and down,

the voices of Boyev and the soldier went grumbling on—the pair of them like twin flutes put to the same lips.

“I take no responsibility. . . .”

“Neither do I. . . .”

“The man who makes the decisions isn’t necessarily the one with the brains. . . .”

“Do you think it’s brains that get people anywhere in this country? It’s having the loudest mouth.”

Osip had tucked the hem of his sheepskin jacket right up into his belt; his legs in their grey trousers of army cloth trod lightly and supply, as though he were walking on springs. He walked as though someone visible to him alone were whirling about in front of him, getting in his way and preventing him from setting a straight course by the shortest way, and he, Osip, were struggling against him, trying to get round him, to slip past him, fainting now to the right, now to the left, sometimes turning sharply back the way he had come, but still dancing onwards, executing curves and half-circles over the ice. His voice sounded in a constant sing-song and it was very pleasant to hear how well it mingled with the sound of the bells.

We were approaching the centre of the 800-hundred or so yard strip of ice when from up-river came a sudden menacing rustling and whispering. At the same moment the ice floated off from beneath me, I staggered and, failing to keep my feet, went down on one knee, caught off balance. Immediately, as soon as I looked up-river, fear gripped me by the throat, took my voice away, darkened my sight—the grey rind of ice had come to life, was arching up into mounds, sharp corners jutted up from the smooth surface, a strange crunching noise shuddered through the

air—as though someone were walking heavy-footed over broken glass.

The water went streaming past me with a quiet, whistling sound, a tree cracked, squealing like a live thing, the men were shouting, crowding together and, breaking through this muffled, awesome clamour, Osip's voice rang out like a bell:

“Separate . . . get away from one another—keep well apart, boys. . . . She's on the move, on the mo-ove! Quick now, lads! Here she goeses. . . .”

He went leaping on ahead as though pursued by hornets and, holding the two-yard measuring rod like a gun, prodded at the ice round about him as though he were fighting someone, and past him the town floated, trembling. The ice immediately beneath me began to creak, breaking into small pieces, water flooded over my ankles, I leapt up and dashed blindly towards Osip.

“Where do you think you're going?” he cried, threatening me with the measuring rod. “Stand back, you devil!”

It seemed that Osip was Osip no longer—his face had grown strangely younger, all that was familiar about it had been wiped away, the blue eyes had gone grey and he looked to have grown half a metre. Straight as a new nail, his legs pressed close together, stretching upwards, he yelled with wide open mouth:

“Don't mill around, don't crowd together—I'll break your necks for you!”

And again he threatened me with the measuring rod.

“Where do you think you're going?”

“We'll drown,” I said quietly.

“Ssh! That's enough. . . .”

But, looking me over, he added more gently and quietly. . . .

"Any fool can drown, but the thing is to get out .. anyhow!"

And again his voice rang out melodiously, shouting words of encouragement as he stood with his head thrown back and chest expanded.

The ice cracked a little and crunched, leisurely breaking into smaller and smaller pieces as it flows on past the town. Some great force had awaken in the earth and was stretching the bank; part of it—beyond where we were, still stood firm, whereas the part opposite us was quietly floating away upstream and soon the earth would break asunder.

This awesome, gradual movement took away all sense of belonging to the dry land: everything was passing away, tearing at the heart and weakening the legs. In the sky, red clouds were slowly floating and the broken ice, reflecting them, was flushed too, as if from the effort to get at me. The whole vast Earth had come to life for the birth of Spring, it was stretching, arching up its high, moist, unkempt breast, its bones were cracking and the river was like a vein full of thick, boiling blood in the mighty flesh of the Earth.

Depressing was the humiliating sense of insignificance and weakness amidst this calm, massive movement, and this humiliation smouldered within me and flamed up into the bold dream of man: to stretch out one hand, to lay it commandingly on the hill, on the river-bank, and to say:

"Stand still, wait, I am coming!"

Sadly sighed the echoing brass of the bells, but I remembered that in twenty-four hours, at midnight, the chime would change to peals of rejoicing, ringing in the Resurrection!

I wanted to live to hear that chime!...

Seven dark figures were swaying before my

eyes, leaping on over the ice; they were waving the planks they carried as though raking the air and ahead of them like a will-o'-the-wisp danced a little old man who resembled Nicholas the Miracle-Worker, and his authoritative voice never for one moment fell silent.

“Watch out!...”

The river had become rough, her living backbone was bending and trembling under our feet, like the whale's in the story of the Little Hunch-Backed Horse, and more and more often the liquid body of the river would come splashing up from under its hide of ice—turgid, cold water, avidly licking at the men's legs.

The men were crossing a narrow pole-bridge over a deep fissure. The quiet, compelling lap-lap of the water created an impression of fathomless depths, invoking thoughts of how infinitely slowly the body would sink into that cold, jostling mass, of how it would blind the eyes and stifle the heart. It conjured up the images of men drowned, of oozy skulls, of swollen faces with staring glassy eyes, of outspread fingers and swollen hands, the skin damp and wrinkled on the palms like an old rag....

The first to go under the ice was Mokey Budyrin; he had been walking ahead of the Mordvinian, silently as ever, almost aloof, calmer than any of us when, suddenly, as though he had been pulled in by the legs, he disappeared. Only his head and shoulders remained on the ice, his arms gripping his plank.

“He-elp!” yelled Osip. “Don't all go crowding, one or two of you—help!”

But Mokey, snorting and spitting, cried to the Mordvinian and me:

“Stand back, lads... I'll manage... it's all right....”

Clambering out onto the ice and shaking himself, he said:

"The hell with it! You really could drown here, you know...."

Now, his teeth chattering and licking his wet moustache with his tongue, he looked more than ever like a large, good-natured dog.

In a flash it came back to me how, a month ago, he had chopped off the tip of his left hand thumb with an axe, had picked up the pallid stump, the nail of which was rapidly turning blue, and, having had a good look at it with his dark, inscrutable eyes, said very quietly in a guilty little voice:

"How many times I've spoilt the poor blighter, there's no counting.... It was dislocated anyway, didn't work properly.... Now I'll bury it."

Carefully he had wrapped the tip of his thumb in shavings and put it in his pocket; only then had he bandaged the wounded hand.

The next one for a dip was Boyev—it seemed as though he dived under the ice of his own volition and immediately set up a hysterical shrieking:

"Hey, h-heavens above, I'm drowning to death, brothers, help me...."

He threshed around so in his fear that it was hard work to extricate him and the Mordvinian nearly lost his life in the struggle, the waters actually closing once over his head.

"Looked as though I was all set for Easter Martins in the Other Place," he said, scrambling out onto the ice and grinning sheepishly, looking still thinner and more angular.

A minute later Boyev fell in again and again began screaming.

"Don't scream, Yashka, you silly old goat!" shouted Osip, threatening him with the measuring

rod. "You'll start a panic! I'll learn you! Take your belts off, lads, turn your pockets inside out, it'll make things easier...."

Every ten paces or so toothy jaws opened up before us all awash with murky saliva and sharp, blue fangs seized at our legs; it seemed as though the river wanted to suck in the men as a snake sucks down young frogs. Our soaking shoes and clothes made it difficult to jump and weighed us down; all of us were as slippery as though we had been licked all over; clumsy and silent, we moved heavily, slowly and resignedly.

Only Osip seemed to have worked out in advance where the fissures would appear in the ice and, as wet as any of us, was leaping from ice-flow to ice-flow like a hare; having jumped across he would pause for a second and, looking back, would call out in ringing tones:

"Hey, there, watch how you go!"

He was playing with the river: she was trying to catch him and he, small and nimble, kept slipping out of her clutches, easily outwitting her every manoeuvre, lightly evading unexpected traps. It even seemed as though it were he who was directing the flow of the ice, kicking large, solid ice-flows back at us from beneath his feet.

"Keep at it, sonnies, don't lose heart!"

"Well done, Uncle Osip!" the Mordvinian muttered with bated enthusiasm. "Zere's a man for you!... Zere's a real man...."

The nearer we got to the bank, the more ground up and worn down was the ice, and the men were falling in more and more often. The town had almost swum right past us, soon we would be borne out into the Volga and there the ice was not yet on the move and we would be sucked beneath it.

"May-be ee drown after all," said the Mord-

vinian quietly, glancing leftwards into the blue mists of the evening.

But suddenly—as though in pity for us—a great wedge of ice drove itself firmly into the bank and, riding up onto the shore, breaking and crunching, came to rest there!

“Ru-un!” yelled Osip furiously. “Run for your lives!”

He leapt up, slipped, fell and, sitting on the edge of the ice-flow with the water splashing up over him, shepherded us all past him—five ran for the shore, jostling and overtaking one another. The Mordvinian and I stopped, wanting to help Osip.

“Run, you puppies, you donkeys, you. Do as you’re told!”

His face was blue and trembling, the eyes dull, the mouth strangely agape.

“Get up, uncle....”

He hung his head.

“Broken my leg, I think... can’t....”

We raised him and carried him and he, an arm round both our necks, grumbled his teeth chattering:

“You’ll drown, you young friends. Well, thanks be to God, our Father. He hasn’t let it happen.... Look out, it won’t hold three, step carefully! Choose where the ice is free of snow, it’s firmer there.... You ought to leave me really!....”

He looked into my face, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and asked:

“And the record of our transgressions—I dare say it’s soaked through now, no good at all, eh?”

As we stepped off the wedge of ice which had ridden up the bank crushing some boat or other to splinters as it did so, all that part of it which had remained in the water cracked loudly and rocking and dipping, went sailing on.

"Look at zet!" said the Mordvinian approvingly. "She saw vat vee need!"

Wet, frozen and in tearing high spirits, we were now out on the bank among a crowd of local people; Boyev and the soldier were already arguing with them acrimoniously. We laid Osip on some planks and he cried out merrily:

"Hey, boys, that's the end of the book, it's all spoilt by the wet."

That book felt like a brick under my coat; unobtrusively getting it out, I threw it far into the river and it plopped into the dark water like a frog.

The Dyatlovs went tearing off up the hill to the pub for vodka, clouting each other with their fists as they ran and yelling:

"Take tha-at!"

"You wai-ait!"

An old man with the beard of an apostle and the eyes of a thief hissed with great conviction straight into my ear:

"And for disturbing peace-loving people, you heathens, you deserve a good beating up...."

Boyev, changing his shoes, shouted:

"In what way have we disturbed you?"

"Christian folk drowning before your very eyes," grumbled the soldier, more hoarse than ever, "and what do you do to help them?"

"Well, what could we do?"

Osip lay on the ground, his legs stretched out before him and, feeling his sheepskin with trembling hands, complained quietly:

"Ah, the hell with it, everything soaked through.... All my clothes ruined ... and I haven't been wearing them a year yet!"

He had grown small again and wrinkled as though he were melting away before our eyes as he lay there on the ground.

Suddenly, raising himself on one elbow, he struggled to a sitting position, gasped and, in an angry, high-pitched voice launched out:

“What the devil got into you fools—you had to get to your bath and to church, if you please! You devil’s ferrymen!... You’ll all come to a bad end.... As if God couldn’t celebrate his Resurrection without you.... You might’ve been killed.... Spoilt all our clothes, blast you....”

We were all changing shoes, wringing out our clothes, sniffing wearily, groaning, exchanging high words with the men from the suburbs, but he continued to shout at us with rising anger:

“And then what must they take into their heads, the bloody fools! They want their bath... there you are, what you *really* want is to have the police on you, they’d give you baths....”

One of the bystanders said soothingly:

“The police’ve been sent for....”

“What’s your game?” Boyev shouted at Osip. “What are you pretending for?”

“I?”

“You!”

“Wait a moment! What do you mean?”

“Who talked the men into trying to cross, eh?”

“Who?”

“You!”

“Me?”

Osip’s face twitched as though from a spasm and in a breaking voice he repeated.

“Me-ee?”

“You’re right there,” Budyrin put in calmly and clearly.

The Mordvinian also backed him up, quietly, sadly:

“Yes, Uncle Osip, you did, really you did!... You ‘ave forgotten...”

"Of course you were the one who started it all," the soldier bellowed with dour authority.

"He's forgo-otten!" shouted Boyev furiously. "How could he have forgotten! Oh no! He's just trying to shift the guilt onto somebody else! He would!"

Osip fell silent and, narrowing his eyes, surveyed the wet, half-dressed men. . . .

Then with a strange little catch in his breath—either laughing or crying—shrugging his shoulders and spreading out his hands, he began to mutter:

"So I did—quite true . . . so it was—all my idea. Who would have thought it!"

"That's more like it!" shouted the soldier triumphantly.

Looking out over the river, which was seething like boiling gruel of millet, Osip went on wrinkling his face and avoiding our eyes guiltily:

"A black-out that's what it was. . . . Oh Lordie-Lordie! And how was it we didn't drown? There's no understanding. . . . Thank God, thank God! . . . Lads. . . . You—er. . . . don't be angry, it's Easter, after all. . . . forgive me, please! . . . Something must've slipped in my mind, I suppose. . . . Quite true! I put you up to it. . . . old fool that I am. . . ."

"Aha?" asked Boyev. "And if I'd drowned, what would you have found to say then?"

It seemed to me that Osip was sincerely overcome by the needlessness and madness of what he had done—slippery, as though he had been licked all over like a new-born calf, he was sitting on the ground shaking his head, running his hands through the sand beneath him, and muttering words of penitence, not looking at anyone.

I watched him, wondering what had happened to that militant leader of men who, going on be-

fore us, had led us with such care, skill and authority.

My soul was filled with an unpleasant emptiness, I squatted down beside Osip and, hoping to preserve something, said softly to him:

“Come off it, uncle Osip....”

He squinted up at me and, running his fingers through his beard, answered just as quietly:

“Ever see the like? There you are....”

And again started lamenting for all to hear:

“What a thing to happen—eh?”

... On the top of the hill, silhouetted against an already darkening sky, there rose a black brush of trees, and the hill crouched over the river like some great beast. The blue shadows of evening had appeared, peeping out from behind the rows of houses, clinging to the dark skin of the hill like bruises, peering from the reddish, moist jaws of the clay ravine which gaped onto the river as though it were reaching down to the water to drink.

The river had grown darker, the whispering and creaking of the ice more muffled and regular; sometimes an ice floe would poke into the bank like the questing snout of a pig, remain motionless for a moment, rock, tear itself away and go floating on only to be replaced by another.

The water was rising swiftly, splashing up the banks, washing away the dirt—and the dirt dissolved like dark smoke in the turgid blue of the water. The air was full of a strange sound, a crunching and a gulping as though some enormous animal were eating something and licking its lips with a long tongue.

From the town came the sweet-sounding, melancholy pealing of bells, softened by distance.

From up the hill like two noisy puppies the Dyatlov brothers were bouncing down with bot-

ties in their hands and across their path—parallel to the river bank—a grey police officer and two black constables came walking.

“Oh Lord!” groaned Osip, gently stroking his knee.

The bystanders moved back a little at the sight of the police, an expectant silence fell, and the officer, a dry little man with a small face and pointed ginger moustaches—came up to us and said severely in a rather hoarse, artificial bass:

“So it was you, you devils.”

Osip had collapsed on his back again and began to speak hurriedly:

“It was me, your honour, I put them up to it! Forgive us, for the sake of this blessed season, your honour....”

“What got into you, you old devil,” the officer began loudly, but his shout was lost, drowned in the swift flow of sweet, caressing words.

“Our homes are here, in the town; on that bank there was nothing to do, and we had not even the money to buy bread, and the day after tomorrow, your honour, is Easter Sunday—we all needed a wash, we wanted to attend the service in church, as we are Christians, and so, I say: Up and at it, lads, if God grants—it is not as though we were going to commit some misdeed. And, indeed, I have suffered for my foolhardiness—look—my poor leg is quite smashed to pieces!”

“Yes!” barked the officer sternly. “And what if you had drowned, what would have happened then?”

Osip sighed a deep, weary sigh:

“What would have happened, your honour? Nothing, if you’ll excuse my saying so....”

The policeman cursed us; we all listened to him silently and attentively, just as though the man were not dirtily and cynically insulting our moth-

ers but saying something important that we should all of us know and treasure in our hearts.

Then, having taken down our names, he went away. We, warmed and cheered after the burning vodka, began to prepare to take ourselves off home; Osip, with a grin, looked after the departing policemen and suddenly, easily, rose to his feet and crossed himself fervently:

“And that’s the end of the story, praise be to God!”

“So,” Boyev’s nasal voice sounded bemused and disappointed, “so that leg of yours—it’s all right? You didn’t break it after all?”

“And did you wish I had?”

“Eh, you comedian! You miserable clown you....”

“Come on, lads!” Osip commanded, pulling his wet hat back onto his head.

... I walked along beside him and behind all the others; he spoke to me very quietly, affectionately, as though he were passing on a secret known to him alone.

“And whatever you do, however hard you try, well—without cunning, without deceit, it’s quite impossible to live. Life just is that way, rot it.... It would be fine to ascend to the heights, only the devil’s always clutching at one’s heels.”

Night had fallen. In the darkness red and yellow lights flickered invitingly.

“Come hither.”

We were walking in the direction of the chimes on the hill, there was a tinkling of rills running from the high banks down under our feet and Osip’s sweet voice mingled with their bubbling.

“I got round the police nicely, didn’t I? That’s the way to get things done—so that no one understands anything and everyone thinks that he himself is the king pin, yes.... Let everyone

think that it is his mind which has shaped events....”

I listened to what he was saying, but understood little of it.

What is more, I did not particularly want to understand, my heart was at ease, my mind at rest; I did not know whether or not I liked Osip but I did know that I was ready to follow him everywhere, anywhere we might need to go—even back across the river with the ice slipping away from beneath our feet.

The bells hummed and sang and it was good to think:

“How many more times I shall be here to welcome the Spring!”

Osip remarked with a sigh:

“But the soul of man—the soul has wings—it flies when he is asleep....”

Wings? How wonderful!

1912

A MAN IS BORN*

It was in the famine year of '92, between Sukhum and Ochemchiry, on the river Kodor, a stone's throw from the sea—the splash of the running surf could be heard distinctly above the cheerful babble of the glittering mountain stream.

Autumn. Yellow leaves of the cherry laurel tree were spinning and darting about in the white foam of the Kodor like nimble trout. I was sitting on the riverside rocks, thinking that the gulls and cormorants, too, were probably taking the leaves for fishes and were disappointed—and that was why they were crying in such a hurt tone out there, on the right, beyond the trees, where the sea was lapping the shore.

The chestnut trees overhead were spangled with gold, and at my feet lay numerous leaves that looked like hands that had been severed from human wrists. The branches of the hornbeam on the opposite bank were already bare and hung in the air like a torn net. Caught within it, there hopped a yellow-and-red mountain woodpecker, tapping at the bark of the trunk with its black beak to drive out the insects, which were gobbled up by those visitors from the far north—the spry little tomtits and grey nuthatches.

On my left, low over the mountain tops, hung

* This story is based on an incident from Gorky's life. At the close of the summer of 1892 Gorky worked in the Caucasus on the construction of the Sukhum-Novorossiisk Highroad. Here, on a deserted road, he came across a woman in travail and delivered her of her child.—*Ed.*

smoky clouds, threatening rain. Their shadows crept over the green slopes where the dead-looking boxwood grew and where, in the hollows of the ancient beeches and lindens, one can find wild honey, which in the days of Rome nearly brought about the undoing of Pompey the Great's soldiers, a whole legion of whom were knocked off their feet by its intoxicating sweetness. The bees make it from the blossoms of the laurel and azalea, and passers-by scoop it out of tree hollows and eat it spread on *lavash*—thin wheaten cakes.

That is exactly what I was doing, sitting on the rocks under the chestnut trees and nursing the stings of an angry bee. I dipped pieces of bread into a tea can filled with honey and ate while admiring the idle play of the tired autumn sun.

The Caucasus in autumn is like the interior of a sumptuous cathedral built by men of great wisdom—they are invariably great sinners too—to conceal their past from the sharp eyes of conscience; a vast temple of gold, turquoise and emeralds; mountainsides carpeted with the finest rugs woven in silk by the Turkmen and in Samarkand and Shemaha. They robbed the whole world and brought all their spoils here before the eyes of the sun, as much as to say: “Thine—from Thine—to Thee!”

I see long-bearded grey-haired giants, wide-eyed like blithe children, coming down the mountains, decorating the land, scattering their multi-coloured treasures with a lavish hand, covering the mountain tops with thick layers of silver, and draping the terraces with the living fabric of manifold trees—and under their hands this heaven-blessed patch of land becomes transformed into a thing of ineffable beauty.

What a splendid post—that of a man in this

world! What a wealth of wonderful things one sees, how poignantly sweet is the quiet delight in beauty that stirs one's heart!

To be sure, at times you find it hard. Burning hatred fills your breast and anguish greedily sucks your heart's blood, but this cannot last for ever. Even the sun often looks down on men very sadly: it has worked so hard for them, and what a poor lot they have turned out to be....

Naturally, there are quite a few good ones, but they need to be mended, or rather, to be remade anew.

Above the bushes on my left I see dark bobbing heads. Through the murmurs of the surf and the gurglings of the river one can faintly hear the sound of human voices. They belong to the "famine-stricken", who had been building a road in Sukhum, and were now on their way to Ochemchiry, in the hope of getting another job there.

I know them—they are from Orel. I had worked with them and we had been paid off together the day before. I had left before them, at night, so as to reach the seashore in time to see the sunrise.

There were five of them—four muzhiks and a young peasant woman with high cheekbones. She was pregnant; her huge belly protruded upwards, and there was a scared look in her blue-grey staring eyes. I see her head in a yellow kerchief, swaying above the bushes like a blossoming sunflower in the wind. Her husband had died in Sukhum—he had overeaten himself on fruit. I had lived with these people in the same bunk house: true to the good old Russian custom, they had talked about their misfortunes so much and so loudly that their lamentations must have been heard a good three miles away.

These were dull people, crushed by misfortune,

which had torn them from their native, worn out, starving soil and swept them like autumn leaves to this place, where the strange, luxuriant clime staggered and dazzled them; the hard conditions of work had stunned them altogether. They looked at everything around them bewilderedly out of sad, blinking, faded eyes, and smiled pitifully to each other, saying in low voices:

“Ai-ai, what land!”

“Rich isn’t the word!”

“A bit stony, though.”

“Not easy land, I must say.”

And then they recalled Kobyli Lozhok, Sukhoi Gon, Mokrenki—their native places, where every handful of earth was the ashes of their forefathers, where everything was well remembered, familiar and dear, watered with their sweat.

There had been another woman with them there—a tall, straight, lantern-jawed woman with a chest as flat as a board, and with dull, coal-black squinting eyes.

In the evening she, together with the woman in the yellow kerchief, would go out back of the bunk house, sit down on a heap of stones, and with her cheek propped in her hand and her head tilted to one side, would sing in a high-pitched angry voice:

*Beyond the village churchyard,
Among the bushes green,
On the yellow sand I'll spread
My shawl so white and clean.
And there I'll wait
For my loving bonny lad
And when he comes
I'll greet him heartily....*

The one in the yellow kerchief was usually silent, looking down with bent neck at her abdo-

men, but sometimes she would suddenly join in, singing the sobbing words of the song in a deep, lazy masculine voice:

*Ah, my darling,
Ah, dear heart,
I am not fated
To see thee more. . . .*

In the black stuffy darkness of the southern night, these weeping voices reminded one of the snowy wilderness of the north, of shrieking blizzards and the distant howl of wolves. . . .

Then the cross-eyed woman fell ill with fever and was carried to town on a canvas stretcher. She shivered on it and moaned as if continuing her song about the churchyard and the yellow sand.

... The head in the kerchief dived and disappeared.

I finished my breakfast, covered the honey in my can with leaves, tied up my knapsack and followed leisurely in the track of the other people, my cornel-wood stick tapping on the hard ground.

There I was, on the grey, narrow strip of roadway. On my right heaved the deep-blue sea. It seemed as if invisible carpenters were working at it with thousands of planes, and the white shavings raced, rustling, for the beach, driven on by the wind, which was moist, warm and fragrant, like the breath of a wholesome woman. A Turkish felucca, heeling over to port, was slipping through the water headed for Sukhum, her sails puffed out like the fat cheeks of that pompous engineer in Sukhum—a most important personage. For some reason he always used to say “shush oop” for “shut up”, and “moibee” for “may be”.

"Shush oop! Moibee you think you're smart, but I'll have you hauled off to the police station in two ticks!"

He liked to have people dragged off to the police station, and it is good to think that the grave worms by now had probably cleaned him down to the bones.

The going was easy, like floating through the air. Pleasant thoughts, motley-garbed memories weaved their slow dance through my mind. The dancing figures within me were like the waves in the sea—white-crested on top, and calm underneath in the depths, where the bright and buoyant hopes of youth swam quietly, like silvery fishes in the briny deep.

The road crept to the seashore, winding its way nearer and nearer to the sandy strip that was lapped by the waves. Even the bushes seemed eager to get a glimpse of the sea as they leaned over the ribbon of the road, straining towards the blue immensity of the watery wilderness.

A wind was blowing from the mountains—a sign of rain.

A low moan came from the bushes—a human moan, which always strikes a responsive chord in human hearts.

I parted the bushes and saw the woman in the yellow kerchief. She was leaning against the trunk of a walnut tree, her head drooping on her shoulder, her mouth contorted, her eyes wild and bulging. Her hands were on her huge belly and she was breathing in such a dreadfully unnatural way that her belly jerked convulsively, while she held it in her hands, moaning and baring yellow wolfish teeth.

"What is it? Has someone hit you?" I asked, bending over her. She worked her bare legs

spasmodically in the grey dust and gasped, rolling her heavy head:

“Go away.... Have you no shame, go away....”

I realised then what it was—I had seen it once before. I was frightened, of course, and started back, but the woman began to howl in a loud, drawn-out voice, her eyes fairly popping out of her head. Tears welled up in them and rolled down her flushed tensed face.

This made me go back to her. I threw down by knapsack, kettle and tea can, laid her down flat on her back and was about to bend her knees up when she pushed me away, struck me in the face and chest, turned and crept farther into the bushes on all fours, snarling and growling like a she-bear:

“Devil! Beast!”

Her arms gave way and she pitched forward on her face. She began to scream again, stretching her legs convulsively.

In a fever of excitement I quickly recollected everything I knew about this business. I turned her over on her back and bent up her legs—the membrane had already emerged.

“Lie still, it’s coming.”

I ran down to the beach, rolled up my sleeves, washed my hands and went back to act as mid-wife.

The woman writhed like birch-bark in a bonfire. She smacked the ground around her with her hands, tore up tufts of wilted grass which she kept trying to stuff into her mouth, and in doing so dropped earth on her contorted ghastly face with its wild bloodshot eyes. Then the membrane broke and the child’s head appeared. I had to restrain the convulsive movements of her legs,

help the child emerge and see that she did not stuff grass into her twisted moaning mouth.

We swore at each other a bit—she through clenched teeth, I just as quietly. She from pain and, perhaps, from shame, I from embarrassment and infinite compassion.

“God!” she gasped, biting her livid foaming lips, while from her eyes, which seemed suddenly to have faded in the sun, there poured the copious tears of a mother’s terrible torment and her whole body was racked as if it were being torn asunder.

“Go away . . . you . . . devil!”

She kept pushing me away with twisted arms, and I said earnestly:

“Don’t be a fool! Hurry up and get it over.”

I was terribly sorry for her, and it seemed as if her tears were gushing from my eyes. Anguish gripped my heart and I felt like screaming. In fact I did scream:

“Quick! Hurry up!”

And lo—in my arms lay a man-child—a red bit of humanity. Though tears dimmed my eyes I could see that he was all red and, already displeased with the world, was struggling, kicking up a dust and yelling lustily, though still tied to his mother. He had blue eyes, a funny little nose squashed on a red rumpled face and his lips moved as he bawled:

“Ya-a-a. . . . Ya-a-a. . . .”

He was so slippery I was afraid he would slip out of my hands. I was on my knees, looking at him, laughing—I was that glad to see him. And I had completely forgotten what had to be done next.

“Cut the cord . . .” the mother whispered, her eyes closed, her face drawn and grey like that of

a corpse Her blue lips barely stirred as she repeated:

“Cut it . . . with your knife.”

My knife had been stolen in the bunk house, so I bit through the navel cord. The baby bawled like one of your real Orel bassos. The mother smiled. I saw a blue light come miraculously to life in the slumberous depths of her eyes, and her dark hand fumbled in her skirt, searching for her pocket, while she breathed through blood-stained bitten lips:

“I’ve no . . . strength. . . . Bit of tape . . . in my pocket. . . . Tie up . . . navel.”

I found the tape and tied up the baby’s navel. Her smile brightened, so happy and radiant that it all but dazzled me.

“Put yourself straight while I go and wash him.”

She murmured anxiously:

“Take care Do it gently. Take care.”

That red bit of humanity did not need gentle handling at all. He clenched his fists and yelled as if he were challenging me to a fight.

“That’s the stuff! Assert yourself, old chap, if you don’t want your fellow men to twist your head off for you.”

He emitted his most earnest and loudest yell when he felt the touch of spray from a wave that splashed over both of us; afterwards, when I began to slap his chest and back, he screwed up his eyes, and began to struggle and scream as the waves washed over him one after another.

“Yell away, old chap! Yell your head off!”

When we got back to his mother we found her lying on the ground with her eyes closed again, biting her lips in the throes of afterbirth; but through the groans and sighs I heard her dying whisper:

"Give him . . . to me . . . "

"He can wait."

"Give him to me!"

With fumbling, trembling hands she began to undo her blouse. I helped her to free her breast, which nature had made for the nurturing of twenty infants, and laid the obstreperous Orelian against her warm body. He twigged at once and stopped yelling.

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God," the woman breathed, quivering, rolling her dishevelled head from side to side on the knapsack.

Suddenly, with a low cry, she opened her eyes again, the sacred, inexpressibly beautiful eyes of motherhood. They were blue, and looked up into the blue sky. A happy, grateful smile gleamed and melted in them. Raising a heavy arm, the mother slowly crossed herself and her child.

"Blessed Mother of God . . . Holy Virgin be praised. . . ."

Her eyes dimmed and she remained silent for a long time, scarcely breathing. Then suddenly, in a firm, matter-of-fact voice, she said:

"Untie my knapsack, lad."

I untied the bag. She looked at me steadily with a faint smile, and I thought I saw a tinge of colour suffuse her hollow cheeks and clammy forehead.

"Go away a minute."

"Take it easy."

"All right. Go away."

I moved away into the bushes. My heart felt tired, and it seemed as if blithe birds were singing in my breast. This, together with the ceaseless murmur of the sea, was so good that I could listen to it for a year.

Somewhere nearby I heard the babble of a

brook. It was like a girl telling her friend about her beloved.

Above the bushes rose a head in a yellow kerchief, now tied in the proper way.

"Hey, what's this? You're up too soon, aren't you?"

Holding on to the branches of a bush, she sat there ashen-faced, as though all the life had been drained from her, and with two great blue pools instead of eyes. She smiled and whispered with tender emotion:

"Look how he sleeps."

He slept all right, no different from any other babies, as far as I could see. The difference, if any, was in the surroundings: he was lying on a heap of bright autumn leaves under a bush, of the kind that don't grow in the Orel countryside.

"You ought to lie down, mother."

"No," she said, shaking her head feebly. "I've got to tidy up and move along to that place—what d'you call it?"

"Ochemchiry?"

"That's it. My folks must be a good few versts away by now."

"You're not going to walk, surely?"

"What about the Holy Virgin? She'll help me."

Well, since she had the Holy Virgin for company, I had nothing more to say!

She gazed down at the puckered little face, her eyes radiating warm beams of kindly light. She licked her lips and stroked her breast with slow movements of the hand.

I lighted a fire and arranged stones around it on which to put the kettle.

"I'll make some tea for you in a minute, mother."

"Oh, do! Everything has dried up in my chest."

"What made your folks desert you?"

"Oh no, they didn't. I just dropped behind. They'd had a drink, you know ... and a good thing too. Fancy having to do this with them around."

She glanced at me and covered her face with her elbow, then spat out with blood and smiled shyly.

"This your first?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"A man, sort of...."

"So I see. Are you married?"

"Haven't had the honour."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not."

She lowered her eyes, then said:

"How is it you know this women's business?"

Now for the kidding.

"I learned it," I said. "I'm a student—d'you know what that is?"

"To be sure I do. Our priest's eldest son is a student. He's learning to be a priest."

"Well, I'm one of those. I'll go and fetch some water."

The woman bent her head over to her baby to hear whether he was breathing. Then she glanced towards the sea.

"I could do with a wash, but the water is strange here. What kind of water is it? It's salty and bitter."

"You go and wash in it—it's healthy water."

"Really?"

"Yes. And it's warmer than the brook, the water there's like ice."

"If you say so...."

An Abkhazian, dozing astride a horse, rode past at a walking pace, his head drooping on his chest. The wiry little horse, twitching its ears, looked askance at us with a round black eye and

snorted. The rider jerked up his head, on which sat a shaggy fur hat, glanced in our direction and lowered his head again.

"Funny people round here, so fierce-looking too," the Orel woman said quietly.

I went for some water. The jet, clear and mercurial, leapt over the stones, and the autumn leaves tumbled about gaily in the water. Wonderful! I washed my hands and face, filled the kettle and walked back. Through the bushes I saw the woman crawling about on her knees, glancing back anxiously.

"What's the matter?"

She started, and her face turned grey. She was trying to conceal something under her body. I guessed what it was.

"Give it to me, I'll bury it."

"Oh, my dear! But it has to be done under the bathhouse, under the floor . . ."

"Can you see them building a bathhouse here soon?"

"You're joking, but I'm scared! What if some beast eats it! It's got to be buried in the ground."

She turned her face away and handed me a wet heavy bundle, saying in a low, shy voice:

"You'll do it properly, in a deep place, won't you? For the sake of Christ . . . and my little one, do it properly, please. . . ."

When I got back I saw her coming away from the beach with staggering steps and outstretched arm, her skirt wet to the waist and her face slightly flushed as if irradiated from within. I helped her to the fire, thinking with amazement: "What sheer animal strength!"

Then we drank tea with honey, and she said quietly:

"So you dropped learning?"

"Yes."

"Drink, I suppose?"

"Yes, ruined by drink, mother!"

"What a shame! Mind you, I noticed you in Sukhum when you had that row with the manager about the food. I said to myself then: he must be a drunkard, he's not afraid of anybody."

She licked the honey from her swollen lips and kept turning her blue eyes to the bush where the latest Orelian was sleeping peacefully.

"I wonder how he'll live?" she said with a sigh, looking at me searchingly. "You were a help—thank you, but will it be good for him, I wonder...."

When she had eaten and drunk she crossed herself, and while I was collecting my household, she sat drowsily swaying her body, staring at the ground with eyes that seemed to have faded again. Then she stood up.

"Are you really going?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you're strong enough?"

"What about the Virgin Mary? Give him to me!"

"I'll carry him."

After an argument she yielded, and we started off, walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

"I hope I don't stumble," she said with an apologetic smile, placing her hand on my shoulder.

The new inhabitant of the land of Russia, the man of unknown destiny, was lying in my arms, making grownup noises through his nose. The sea, laced with white shavings, splashed and murmured; the bushes whispered to each other, the sun shone on its noontide path.

We walked along slowly, the mother stopping now and again, heaving a deep sigh, throwing her head back, gazing around at the sea, the

woods, the mountains, then peering into her son's face. Her eyes, laved by the tears of suffering, were amazingly limpid again, shining with the blue light of infinite love.

Once she stopped and said:

"God! My God, how wonderful it is! How wonderful! I could go on like this, on and on to the world's end, with him, my little one, growing and growing in freedom at his mother's breast, my darling little boy. . . ."

The sea murmured and murmured. . . .

1912

THE CREEPY-CRAWLIES

One hot summer's night, in a lonely street on the outskirts of the town, I witnessed a strange scene: a woman was standing in the middle of a large puddle, stamping her feet and splashing the mud about the way children do—stampin and singing a dirty song in a snuffling voice.

A violent thunderstorm had swept over the town during the day and the downpour had soaked the clayey mud in the street; the puddle was a deep one, and the woman's legs sank into it almost up to the knees. Judging by the sound of her voice, the singer was drunk. If, tired out with dancing, she fell in the mud, she could easily drown in it.

Pulling up the tops of my highboots, I waded into the puddle, took the dancer by the arms and dragged her to dry ground. For a moment she must have been frightened, because she followed me submissively, but then she wrenched her right arm free with a twist of her whole body, hit me in the chest and yelled: "Help!"

The next minute she was back in the puddle, dragging me in with her.

"To hell with you!" she muttered. "I won't go! I'll live without you . . . you try and live without me . . . help!"

A night-watchman emerged from the darkness, stopped within five paces of us and said gruffly: "What's the row about?"

I told him that I was afraid the woman might drown in the mud and that I was trying to get

her out. The watchman took a closer look at the drunken woman, spat loudly and commanded: "Mashka, come on out!"

"I don't want to."

"Come out, I tell you!"

"I won't."

"D'y you want me to give you a good hiding, damn yer?" the watchman said mildly, then turned to me, adding good-naturedly and chattily. "She's a local woman, a tow-picker, Mashka Frolikha. Got a fag?"

We lit up. The woman stamped about in the puddle, shouting:

"Bosses! I'm my own boss. If I want to I'll take a dip."

"I'll dip you one below your back!" the watchman warned—he was a bearded sturdy old man. "She kicks up a row like this every blessed night And at home she has a legless son."

"Does she live far from here?"

"She ought to be killed," the watchman said, leaving my question unanswered.

"Someone ought to take her home," I suggested

The watchman snorted into his beard, peered into my face in the light of his cigarette and walked off, tramping heavily through the mud.

"Take her! But have a good look at her mug first."

The woman sat down in the mud, and began threshing her arms about in it, screeching in a hideous snuffling voice:

"Like rowing . . . in the sea . . ."

From the black chasm of the sky a big star was reflected in the dirty greasy water. When ripples covered the puddle the reflection disappeared. I waded into the puddle again, grasped the singer under the armpits, lifted her, and, pushing her along with my knees, carried her out to the fence.

She resisted, waved her arms about and challenged me:

"Hit. me, come on, hit me! Who cares! Oh, you beast... oh, you rotter. Come on, hit me!"

I leaned her up against the fence and asked where she lived. She raised her drunken head and looked at me with dark bleary eyes. I saw the sunken bridge of her nose, the remainder of which stuck out and upward like a button; her upper lip, twisted up by a scar, bared a row of small teeth, and her small plump face leered at me:

"All right, come along," she said.

We started off, bumping against the fence. The wet hem of her skirt whipped my legs.

"Come along, dearie," she said hoarsely, seeming to grow sober. "I'll be nice to you. I'll give you comfort."

She brought me to a large two-storied house standing in a yard. gingerly, like a blind woman, she threaded her way between carts, barrels, packing cases and wood piles scattered in the yard, and stopped in front of a hole in the foundation.

"Go down," she said.

Leaning against the slimy wall with my arm round the woman's waist to hold up the lurching body, I descended the slippery steps. Gropingly I found the felt covering and the bolt of the door, opened it and stopped on the threshold of the black hole, hesitating to go further.

"Mummy, is that you?" a low voice came out of the darkness.

"It's me."

The smell of warm rot mingled with that of pitch hit me in the face. A match was struck and in its tiny glow I caught a momentary glimpse of a child's pale face.

"Who else could it be? It's me," the woman repeated, leaning her whole weight against me.

Another match was struck, there was a tinkle of glass, and a skinny funny hand lighted a small tin oil lamp.

"My precious," the woman said, swaying, and slumped down in a corner. There, barely rising above the brick floor, a wide shakedown had been prepared.

Tending the flame of the lamp, the child turned down the wick, which had flared and begun to smoke. His face was grave, sharp-nosed, with bunched lips like a girl's—a face painted with a fine brush and strikingly incongruous in this dark damp hole. Having fixed the light he glanced at me with shaggy-looking eyes and said, "She's drunk?"

His mother lay across the bed, making sobbing, snoring noises.

"She ought to be undressed," I said.

"Then undress her," the boy answered, lowering his eyes.

When I started pulling off the woman's wet skirts, he enquired in a low matter-of-fact voice:

"Shall I put the lamp out?"

"What for?"

He did not answer. While I was busy with his mother, handling her as I would a sack of meal, I watched him. He was sitting in a packing case on the floor, under the window. The case was made of thick boards and bore the inscription in black printed letters:

HANDLE WITH CARE
N. R. & Co.

The sill of the square window was on a level with the boy's shoulder. Along the wall were several rows of narrow shelves with stacks of cigarette boxes and match boxes on them. Next to the case in which the boy sat was another case covered

with yellow packing paper, which apparently did service as a table. His pitiful arms clasped at the back of his neck, the boy was looking up at the dark windowpanes.

Having undressed the woman, I tossed her wet clothes on the stove, then I washed my hands in a corner out of an earthenware wash-stand, and said to the child as I wiped them on my hand-kerchief:

“Well, goodbye!”

He looked at me and said with a slight lisp:

“Shall I put the lamp out now?”

“Just as you like.”

“Are you going away, aren’t you going to lie down?” He pointed a skinny arm at his mother. “With her.”

“What for?” I said blankly.

“You know yourself,” he said with shocking simplicity, then added: “They all do.”

Disconcerted, I looked around. On my right was the jutting ugly stove, on the hearth dirty dishes, in a corner, behind the packing case, pieces of tarred rope, a heap of oakum, billets of woods, chips and a yoke.

Stretched at my feet was the yellow snoring body.

“May I sit with you a bit?” I asked the boy.

He gave me a sullen look and said:

“She won’t wake up till the morning, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t need her.”

I squatted down beside his packing case and told him how I had met his mother. I tried to speak in a jocular tone:

“She sat down in the mud and started rowing, like she was using oars, and singing. . . .”

He nodded, smiling a wan little smile the while he scratched his narrow chest.

"That's because she's drunk. She larks about even when she's sober. Just like a little girl...."

I could now see his eyes clearly—they really were shaggy, with surprisingly long eyelashes, and little hairs grew thickly on his eyelids too. Bluish shadows lay under his eyes, accentuating the pallor of his skin, and his high forehead with a crease over the bridge of his nose was crowned with a shock of curly reddish hair. The expression of his eyes, attentive, calm, was indescribable. It was all I could do to sustain their strange, un-human look.

"What's wrong with your legs?"

He fumbled among the rags and disengaged a withered leg, which resembled a poker. He lifted it with his hand and placed it on the edge of the case.

"See what they're like? Both of 'em, born that way. They don't walk, they're not alive—just useless...."

"And what are in those little boxes?"

"That's my manigery," he said, picking his leg up with his hand as if it were a stick and thrusting it back among the rags at the bottom of the case. Then with a bright friendly smile he said:

"Would you like to see it? Then sit down properly. You've never seen anything like it in your life."

With deft movements of his thin, disproportionately long arms he raised himself and began taking boxes off the shelves, handing them to me one by one.

"Be careful, don't open them, they'll run away! Put it to your ear and listen! Well?"

"Something stirring inside."

"Aha. That's a spider, the blighter! He's called the Drummer. As cunning as they make 'em!"

The wonderful eyes lighted up and a smile

played upon the bluish face. With swift deft hands he took the boxes off the shelves, put them to his ear, then to mine and commented animatedly:

“And here’s cockroach Anisim, a braggart, like a soldier. This is a fly, Mrs. Official, a nasty piece o’ work. Buzzing all day long, swearing at everybody, she even dragged Mummy around by the hair. Not the fly—the Missus living across the road, the fly only looks like her. And this a black beetle, a great big beetle—the Boss; he’s not bad, only he’s a drunkard and a shameless fellow. When he’s on the booze he crawls about the yard naked, all hairy like a black dog. And here is a dung-beetle, Uncle Nikodim. I caught him outside. He’s a bum, really, calls himself a holy wanderer. Supposed to be collecting money for a church; Mummy calls him Cheapskate; he’s one of her lovers too. She has umpteen lovers, thick as flies around her, though she has no nose.”

“Does she beat you?”

“Who, she? I like that! She can’t live without me. She’s kind-hearted, only a drunkard—but then they’re all drunkards in our street. She’s beautiful and gay, too.... A hell of a drunkard, a whore! I tell her: get off the booze, you silly woman, you’ll get rich—but she just laughs. A fool woman, what can you expect! But she’s good, you’ll see when she wakes up.”

He smiled engagingly, a smile so sweet that I felt like blubbering, crying out for the whole town to hear me, so deeply wrung was my heart with compassion. His beautiful head nodded on his thin neck like a strange flower, and his eyes, growing brighter and brighter with animation, attracted me with irresistible force.

Listening to his childish, but ghastly prattle, I had forgotten for a moment where I was, and

suddenly I became aware again of the prison-like window, spattered with mud outside, the black maw of the stove, the pile of oakum in the corner, and by the door, on a heap of rags, yellow like oil, the body of the mother-woman.

"Nice manigery, isn't it?" the boy said with pride.

"Very nice."

"I have no butterflies, though—no butterflies or moths."

"What's your name?"

"Lyonka."

"You're my namesake."

"Really? What kind of person are you?"

"Oh, just nobody."

"Tell me another one! Every person is somebody, I ought to know. You're a good body."

"Maybe."

"I can see it. You're scary, too."

"Scary?"

"You bet!"

He smiled a knowing smile and even winked at me.

"What makes you think I'm scary?"

"Well, you're sitting with me here, and that shows you're scared to go out at night!"

"But day is breaking already."

"And you'll go away."

"I'll come again to see you."

He did not believe me. He covered those sweet shaggy eyes of his with his eyelashes, then said, after a pause:

"What for?"

"To sit with you. You are very interesting. May I come?"

"Go ahead. Everyone comes here."

With a sigh he added:

"You're only kidding."

“I’m not. I’ll come, really!”

“All right then. But come to me, not to Mummy—who wants her? Let’s be friends, you and me!”

“All right.”

“There. It doesn’t matter that you’re a grownup. How old are you?”

“Getting on for twenty-one.”

“And I’m getting on for twelve. I have no chums, only Katka the water-carrier’s girl, but her mother beats her because she comes to see me. Are you a thief?”

“No. Why a thief?”

“You’ve got such an ugly mug, skinny as anything and with a long nose, just like thieves have. We have two thieves coming here, one of ‘em Sashka, a fool and a bully, the other Vanichka—he’s kind-hearted, like a dog. Have you got any little boxes?”

“I’ll bring some.”

“Do. I won’t tell Mummy you’re coming.”

“Why not?”

“Just like that. She’s ever so pleased when men come again. She loves men, the baggage—not half she does. A funny kid, that Mummy o’ mine. Got herself in the family way with me when she was fifteen and doesn’t know herself how it happened. When will you be coming?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“By evening she’ll be drunk. What do you do for a living if you don’t thieve?”

“I sell Bavarian kvass.”

“Do you? Bring me a bottle, eh?”

“Why, sure. Well, I’ll be going.”

“Go ahead. Will you come again?”

“Sure.”

He held out both long arms and I took those thin cold little bones in my own two hands and

shook them. Without looking back at him I clambered out into the yard like a drunken man.

Day was breaking. A tremulous dying Venus hung over the damp heap of tumbledown structures. The square eyes of the basement windows, dull and dirty like the eyes of a drunkard, stared at me out of the muddy hole beneath the wall of the house. A red-faced man lay asleep in a cart by the gate, his huge bare legs sprawled wide apart and his thick stiff beard sticking up into the sky—white teeth shone in it, as if the man, his eyes shut, were laughing fiendishly, derisively. An old dog with a bald patch on its back, apparently caused by scalding water, came up to me, sniffed at my leg and whimpered hungrily, filling my heart with unbidden compassion.

The puddles in the streets, which had settled overnight, mirrored the morning sky, and the blue and pink reflections gave to the dirty puddles an offensive, needless, soul-confounding beauty.

The next day I asked the children in my street to catch some beetles and butterflies for me; I bought some pretty little boxes at the chemist's, and went to see Lyonka, taking with me a bottle of kvass, some honey-cakes, sweets and buns.

Lyonka received my gifts with utter amazement, his eyes wide and more beautiful than ever in the light of day.

“Gosh!” he said in a deep unchildlike voice. “Look at all this! Are you a rich man, or what? How can it be—a rich man, so poorly dressed, and not a thief, you say? Gee, what lovely boxes! I’m afraid to touch ‘em even, I haven’t washed my hands. What’s that inside? Oo-ow—what a whopper of a beetle! All coppery, even green—oh, gosh! Run out and fly away, will you? Nothing doing.”

Then all of a sudden he shouted gaily:

"Mum! Come on, you tait, get down and wash my hands. Just look what he's brought. You know, the one who came last night and lugged you in, like the copper on point duty. His name's Lyonka too."

"You should say thank you to him," I heard an oddly quiet voice behind me.

The boy nodded vigorously:

"Thank you, thank you!"

A dense cloud of hair-like dust floated about in the basement, and through it I could just make out, on the ledge of the stove, the frowzy head, the disfigured face of the woman, the glint of her teeth, bared in that involuntary, ineffaceable smile.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning," the woman answered. Her snuffling voice was quiet but cheerful, almost gay. She looked at me through narrowed eyes, in a mocking sort of way.

Lyonka, forgetting about me, was chewing a honey-cake, mumbling to himself as he carefully opened the boxes. His eyelashes cast a shadow on his cheeks, accentuating the blue under his eyes. The sun, bleary like the face of an old man, looked through the dirty windowpanes. It shed a soft light on the boy's reddish hair. His shirt was open at the throat and I could hear the heart beating behind the thin bones, raising the skin and the barely perceptible nipple.

His mother got down from the stove, moistened a towel under the wash-stand, went up to Lyonka and took his left hand.

"He's run away, stop, he's run away!" he shouted, wriggling about in his box, twisting his whole body round, scattering the rags beneath him and baring his livid immobile legs. The woman laughed, fumbling among the rags.

"Catch him!" she shouted.

She caught the beetle, placed it in the palm of her hand, examined it with sprightly eyes the colour of cornflowers, and said to me in the tone of an old acquaintance:

"We have lots of these."

"Don't squash it," her son said warningly. "She sat down on my manigery once when she was drunk and squashed a whole lot of 'em."

"Forget it, my precious."

"I buried them, heaps of 'em."

"But I caught some more for you afterwards, didn't I?"

"What's the use! Those you squashed were trained beetles, stupid head. When they peg out I bury them under the stove—I crawl out and bury 'em—I have a cemetery there. You know, I once had a spider, Minka, just like one of Mum's lovers—one of the old ones who's now in jail, a fat, jolly fellow—"

"Oh, you precious darling," the woman said, stroking the boy's curls with a small, dark, stubby-fingered hand. Then, nudging me with her elbow, she said with smiling eyes:

"A fine son? What eyes, eh?"

"You can take one eye and give me back my legs," Lyonka said, grinning, as he examined the beetle. "Looks like iron. Fat. Like that monk, Mum—the one you knitted the ladder for—remember?"

"I should say I do."

Laughing, she began to tell me the story.

"A monk blew in one day, a great hulking fellow, and he says, 'Now you're a tow-picker—can you make me a rope ladder?' I'd never heard of such ladders in all my born days. No, I says, I couldn't. 'Then I'll teach you,' he says. He threw open his cassock, and would you believe it, he

had a thin rope wound round his whole belly, a long coil of strong rope. He taught me how to do it. I knitted away and kept wondering: now, what does he want it for? To rob a church maybe?"

She laughed, put her arm round her son's shoulder and kept stroking it.

"A bunch o' lively cards! He came at the appointed time, and I says to him: If you want this for robbery, my man, then I'm not having any! But he just laughs kind o' cunningly. 'No,' he says, 'it's for climbing over a wall. We've got a big high wall down at our place, and we're sinful men, with sin living just on the other side of the wall—get me?' I cottoned then. He wanted it to go out wenching at night. Did we laugh, he and I."

"You love a good laugh, you do," the boy said in the tone of an elder. "What about putting on the samovar?"

"But we have no sugar."

"Go and buy some."

"We have no money either."

"Ugh, your drinking's a ruination! Take some from him." He turned to me: "Have you got any money?"

I gave the woman some money. She sprang to her feet with alacrity, took a small, dented, smudgy samovar off the stove, and went out, humming a tune to herself.

"Mummy!" the boy shouted after her. "Wash the window, I can't see anything!"

"Smart bit o' poultry, let me tell you!" he went on, as he carefully laid the boxes with the insects out on the shelves. The shelves were of cardboard, suspended on strings from nails driven between the bricks of the damp wall. "Hard-working too. When she starts picking the tow you can choke. The place is full o' dust. I cry: Mummy take me

out into the yard, for God's sake, I'll choke in here. But she says, put up with it, keep me company, she says. She loves me, no mistake! She works and sings, knows thousands o' songs, she does."

Animated, his wonderful eyes glowing, his thick eyebrows raised, he began to sing in a hoarse alto voice:

There on the sofa lies Sophie...

After listening for a while, I said:

"That isn't a nice song."

"They're all like that," Lyonka reassured me, then suddenly started: "Hark, the music has arrived! Quick, lift me up."

I raised his light little bones enclosed in a sack of grey thin skin. Eagerly, he thrust his head through the open window and hung there stock-still, his withered legs dangling helplessly down the wall. Outside, a street-organ was raucously grinding out scraps of some tune or other, a bass-voiced child was shouting joyfully and a dog was howling quietly. Lyonka listened to this music and hummed softly in tune with it.

The dust in the basement had settled and it grew lighter. Over his mother's bed hung a cheap clock, its pendulum, the size of a penny, crawling limpingly over the grey wall. The dishes on the hearth were unwashed, and on everything lay a thick layer of dust, heaviest of all on the cobwebs in the corners, which hung down in dirty tatters. Lyonka's dwelling resembled a dust hole, and the unmitigated ugliness of squalor stared one brazenly in the face from every inch of this hole.

The samovar began to hum its dismal tune, and the street-organ, as if scared by it, suddenly fell silent. A hoarse voice snarled: "Riff-raff!"

"Take me down," said Lyonka, sighing. "They've chased him away."

I seated him in the box, and he winced and rubbed his chest with his hands, coughing carefully.

"My chest hurts. Breathing real air a long time is bad for me. I say, did you ever see devils?"

"No."

"Nor did I. I keep looking under the stove in the night, in case they come out. But they don't come. Devils haunt cemeteries, don't they?"

"What do you want with them?"

"It's interesting. What if one of the devils was a good one? Katka the water-carrier's girl saw a devilkin in the cellar—she took fright. But I'm not afraid of frightful things."

He tucked the rags round his legs and continued briskly:

"I like 'em even—I like frightful dreams, I do. I once dreamt a tree with the roots growing on top—the leaves on the ground and the roots stretching up into the sky. I was all in a sweat and woke up scared stiff. And once I saw Mummy—she was lying naked and a dog was eating out her stomach. He'd bite off a piece and spit it out, bite off another one and spit it out. And once our house shook itself and went riding down the street, its doors and windows banging, and that Official woman's cat running after it. . . ."

He twitched his thin shoulders in a shivery way, took a sweet, unwrapped the coloured paper, smoothed it out carefully and laid it on the windowsill.

"I'll make all kinds of nice things out of these papers. Or maybe I'll give them to Katka. She likes nice things, too—bits of glass, crocks, papers and things. I say, if you keep feeding and feeding a beetle, it'll grow up like a horse, won't it?"

Clearly, he believed this, so I answered:
"If you feed it well, it will."

"No, really!" he cried, overjoyed. "But Mum-my just laughs, the silly ninny!"

He added a foul swear word.

"She's foolish. You can feed a cat up to a horse much quicker, can't you?"

"I daresay."

"I haven't got the feed, worse luck. It would be grand!"

He was tense with excitement, his hand clutched tight to his chest.

"Flies would fly about the size of a dog. And you could use a beetle to haul loads of bricks—if he's as big as a horse, he'd be strong, wouldn't he!"

"The trouble is they've got whiskers."

"That doesn't matter, you can use the whiskers as reins. Or take a crawling spider, say—a whopper as big as... as what? I wouldn't have him bigger'n a kitten, though, he'd be too frightful! I wish I had legs, I'd show 'em what's what! I'd work like mad and feed up my whole manigery. I'd open a shop, and afterwards I'd buy Mum-my a house in an open field. Have you ever been in an open field?"

"Why, yes."

"What is it like, tell me?"

I began to tell him about fields and meadows, and he listened attentively without interrupting. His eyelashes dropped over his eyes and his mouth opened slowly as if the boy were falling asleep. Seeing this, I lowered my voice, but his mother came in with the boiling samovar, a paper bag under her arm and a bottle of vodka sticking out from under her jacket.

"Here we are!"

"Could you beat that," sighed the boy, wide-eyed. "Nothing but grass and flowers. Mum,

couldn't you get a hand-cart somewhere and take me out into the open field! I'll die without ever seeing it. You're such a pig, Mum, really!" he wound up in a sad pained voice.

His mother said kindly: "You shouldn't swear. You're too little yet."

"It's all right for you to say 'don't swear'—you go where you like, just like a dog. You're lucky. I say," he said, turning to me, "was it God who made the field?"

"I suppose so."

"What for?"

"For people to walk in."

"Open field," the boy said, smiling wistfully. "I'd take my manigery out there and set them all free, I would. Let 'em have a good time, my domestics. I say, do they make God in a *bogadelnya*?"*

His mother squealed, convulsed with laughter. She threw herself down on the bed, kicking her legs and shrieking.

"Oh, carry me upstairs, somebody! Oh, my precious! Oh, what a scream!"

Lyonka glanced at her with a smile and affectionately uttered a dirty swearword.

"Gets herself in stitches, just like a child! She loves a good laugh, she does."

And he used the swearword again.

"Let her laugh," I said. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind," Lyonka agreed. "I'm only angry with her when she doesn't wash the window. I keep begging her, wash the window, I

* The Russian for God is *Bog*. *Bogadelnya* is the Russian for almshouse. The second part of the word might have been derived from *delat*—to make—*Ed.*

can't see the blessed daylight, but she forgets all the time."

The woman chuckled as she washed the tea things and winked to me with a bright blue eye.

"Isn't he a jewel, bless his heart? If it wasn't for him I'd have drowned myself a long time ago, really! Or hanged myself."

She said this smiling.

Lyonka suddenly asked me:

"Are you a fool?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Mummy says you are a fool."

"Yes, but why?" the woman exclaimed, not at all put out. "He brings a drunken woman in from the street, puts her to bed and goes off, just like that! I didn't mean it spitefully. What a telltale you are, ugh!"

She, too, spoke like a child, her manner of speech was that of a little girl. Her eyes, too, were clear as a child's—all the more ugly by contrast was her noseless face with the raised upper lip and bared teeth. A sort of walking, sinister sneer, a gay mockery.

"Well, let's have tea," she said with a solemn air.

The samovar stood on a case next to Lyonka, and a mischievous jet of steam spouting from under the dented lid touched his shoulder. He put his hand over it, and when his palm became moist from the steam, he wiped it on his hair, his eyes wearing a dreamy look.

"When I grow up big," he said, "Mum will make me a handcart and I'll crawl about the streets, go begging. And when I've begged enough money I'll crawl out into the open field."

"Oho-ho," his mother sighed and the next moment laughed softly. "He thinks a field is a para-

dise, the darling! But there are only camps there, and shameless soldiers, and drunks."

"No, there aren't," Lyonka checked her, frowning. "You ask him what it's like, he's seen it."

"So have I."

"When drunk."

They started arguing, just like children. Just as hotly and illogically. Meanwhile, warm evening had set in, and a thick grey-blue cloud stood in the reddening sky. It grew dark in the basement.

The boy drank a mug of tea and perspired. He glanced at me, then at his mother, and said:

"I'm full up, I even feel sleepy, really...."

"Go to sleep then," his mother advised.

"And he'll go away! Will you go away?"

"Don't worry, I won't let him go," the woman said, nudging me with her knee.

"Don't go away," Lyonka said. He shut his eyes, stretched luxuriously and dropped back into his packing-case. Then suddenly he raised his head and said to his mother in a tone of rebuke:

"Why don't you marry him like other women do, instead of messing about with every Tom, Dick and Harry—they only beat you. He's a kind man, he is...."

"Go to sleep," the woman said softly, bending over the saucer from which she was drinking her tea.

"And he's rich."

For a minute the woman was silent, sipping the tea with awkward lips, then she said to me as she would to an old acquaintance:

"So that's how we live, just jogging along, he and I and no one else. They scold me out in the yard—call me a loose woman. So what? I've got nothing to be ashamed of. Besides, I'm damaged goods on the outside, as you can see. Everyone

can see at once what I'm good for. Yes. He's fallen asleep, my precious. It's a good child I have."

"Yes. Very good!"

"I can't get enough of looking at him. Clever, too, isn't he?"

"A wise head."

"You said it His father was a gentleman, an old boy. One of those—what d'you call 'em? They have an office—you know. Write papers."

"A notary?"

"That's it! Nice old gentleman. Kind. He loved me, I worked as a maid in his house."

She covered her son's bare legs with the rags, arranged the dark thing under his head that served as a pillow, then resumed in an easy manner:

"All of a sudden he died. It happened in the night, soon after I had left him. He dropped down on the floor, just dropped down dead. You're in business—selling kvass?"

"Yes."

"On your own?"

"For a boss."

She moved closer, saying:

"You needn't feel squeamish about me, young man. I'm not infectious any more, ask anyone in the street, they all know it."

"I'm not squeamish."

She laid her small hand with the roughened fingers and broken nails on my knee and went on earnestly:

"I am ever so grateful to you for Lyonka—it's been a real holiday for him today. This is a good thing you have done."

"I must be going," I said.

"Where?" she asked, surprised.

"I have business to attend to."

"Stay here!"

"I can't."

She looked at her son, then at the window and the sky, and said quietly:

“Why not stay? I’ll cover my mug with a kerchief. I do want to thank you for my son’s sake. I’ll cover myself up, eh?”

She spoke with such earnest human warmth, with such good feeling. And her eyes—the eyes of a child in a disfigured face—smiled, not the smile of a beggar, but that of a rich person, who could pay his debt of gratitude.

“Mummy!” the boy suddenly cried out, sitting up with a start. “They’re crawling! Quick, Mummy!”

“He’s been dreaming,” she said to me, bending over her son.

I went out into the yard and stood there, sunk in thought. From the open window of the basement flowed a loud song, a mother’s lullaby to her son. It was sung in gay snuffling tones and the strange words were clearly enunciated.

*The Creepy-Crawlies came again,
With all the misery and all the Pain,
Miseries without number,
To tear the heart asunder!
Woe's me, woe's me!
Whither shall we flee?*

I left the yard quickly, grinding my teeth to keep from howling.

FIRST LOVE*

... It was then that fate, with the sole purpose of completing my education, made me undergo the searing experience of first love which had both tragic and comic features.

Some friends of mine had arranged to go boating on the Oka River and had delegated me to invite X. and his wife, a couple who had recently returned from France and whom I had not yet met. I visited them in the evening.

They lived in the basement of an old house. In front of it, stretching from one side of the street to the other, was a puddle that remained there all spring and most of the summer. The crows and dogs used it as a looking-glass, the pigs as a bath.

So engrossed was I in my thoughts that I slipped and crashed into the door like a landslide, causing a strange dismay. I was received ungraciously by a fattish man of middle height with a bushy brown beard and kindly blue eyes, who stood in my way screening the doorway into the room behind him.

Pulling his clothes into place, he said curtly: "What can I do for you?" adding in rebuke: "Before entering a house one usually knocks at the door."

In the shadows of the room behind him I could see something like a big white bird fluttering about, and a clear bright voice said:

* First published in the magazine *Krasnaya Nov* (1923) in the "Autobiographic Stories" series.—*Ed.*

"Especially if it's a married couple you've come to see."

I asked with annoyance if they were the people I was looking for, and when the man, who looked like a prosperous tradesman, assured me they were, I explained the purpose of my visit.

"You say Clark has sent you?" repeated the man, stroking his beard solemnly. Suddenly he cried out, "Ouch! Olga!" and whirled round, clutching that part of the anatomy which, being located below the small of the back, is not mentioned in polite society. I had the impression he had been pinched.

His place in the doorway was taken by a slim girl who gazed at me with smiling blue eyes.

"Who are you? A policeman?"

"Oh, no. It's just my trousers," I replied politely.

She laughed, but I did not take offence because the sparkle in her eyes was just what I had long been looking for. Evidently it was my clothes that had made her laugh. I was wearing the full trousers of a policeman and the white jacket of a cook. This latter is a most convenient article of attire, substituting as it does for a suit coat and buttoning up to the throat so that no shirt is required underneath. Borrowed hunting-boots and a wide-brimmed hat of the kind worn by Italian banditti were effective finishing touches.

She pulled me by the sleeve into the room and pushed me towards the table.

"Why are you wearing such freakish clothes?" she asked.

"Why do you call them freakish?"

"Come, don't be angry," she said appealingly.

What an odd girl! How could anyone be angry with her?

The man with the beard was sitting on the bed rolling a cigarette.

Indicating him with my eyes I asked:

"Is he your father or your brother?"

"Her husband," he said deliberately. And she asked, laughing: "Why?"

"Forgive me," I said after a moment's scrutiny of her face.

We went on making disconnected remarks for another five minutes or so, but I felt at ease and would willingly have sat in that basement room for five hours, or days, or years, for the pleasure of gazing at her fair oval face and gentle eyes. The lower lip of her small mouth was fuller than the upper one, giving the impression of being swollen a little. Her thick brown hair was clipped short and formed a fluffy cap upon her head, curling about her shell-like ears and pink cheeks. Her hands and arms were lovely; I had seen them bared to the elbow as she had stood in the doorway holding on to the jamb. She was dressed very simply, in a white shirtwaist, with full sleeves and lace trimmings, and a well-fitting white skirt. But the most remarkable feature about her was her eyes. What joy, sympathy, and friendly curiosity they radiated! And what is more, they were lighted by just the sort of smile (there could be no doubt about it!) a young man of twenty craves for, especially if his heart has been bruised by rough handling.

"It's about to rain," announced her husband, exhaling a cloud of smoke into his beard.

I glanced out of the window. The sky was clear and studded with stars. I took the hint and went away, but I was filled with the quiet joy of one who has found what he has long sought for.

All night long I wandered through the fields, ruminating upon the tender shine of those blue

eyes. By morning I had convinced myself that that burly creature with the beard and the contented look of a well-fed cat was no husband for her. Indeed, I was filled with pity for her, poor dear! To think of having to live with a man who wore bread crumbs in his beard!

On the next day we went boating on the murky Oka under a high embankment streaked by layers of varicoloured marl. The day was the finest since the creation of the world. The sun blazed in a festive sky, the fragrance of ripe strawberries was wafted over the river, people were aware of their own goodness and this filled me with joy and love for them. Even the husband of my adored turned out to be a fine chap—he did not get into the boat in which his wife sat and which I rowed. He behaved admirably all day. First he told us interesting stories about Gladstone, then he drank a jug of excellent milk, stretched himself out under a tree, and slept like a child until night-fall.

Naturally our boat arrived first at the picnic site, and when I carried my lady out she said:

“How strong you are!”

I felt capable of overturning the highest steeple and told her it would cost me no effort to carry her all the way back to town (which was a good seven versts). I can’t say I’m sure I could actually have performed the feat. She laughed softly and caressed me with her eyes. All day long I was conscious of the shine in her eyes, and, of course, I was certain they shone only for me.

Matters developed with a rapidity that was not strange when you consider that the young woman had never before seen an animal so extraordinary, and that the animal was pining for a woman’s tenderness.

Soon I learned that, despite her youthful appear-

ance, she was ten years my elder, had graduated from a School of Young Women of the Nobility in Belostok, had been engaged to the Commandant of the Winter Palace in Petersburg, had lived in Paris, and had studied both painting and obstetrics. Later it turned out that her mother, too, had been an obstetrician and had been responsible for bringing me into the world. I took this fact as a good omen and rejoiced in it.

Her association with Bohemians and political émigrés, the liaison she had formed with one of the latter, the half-starved, half-vagrant life they had led in the basements and attics of Paris, Petersburg, and Vienna, had given her an amusingly inconsistent but exceptionally interesting personality. She was as pert as a tomboy, observed life and people with the curiosity of a clever schoolgirl, sang French songs with spirit, smoked cigarettes gracefully, drew skilfully, showed some talent as an actress, and was expert in making clothes and hats. The one thing she did not practise was obstetrics.

"I have had only four patients in my life and seventy-five per cent of them died," she said.

This was enough to make her lose all taste for aiding indirectly the population increase. As for direct aid, a pretty and charming four-year-old daughter testified to her high qualifications in this field. She spoke about herself as of someone she knew intimately and had grown a bit bored with. But at times it was as if she caused herself astonishment: her eyes would grow beautifully dark and a faint smile of embarrassment would glimmer in their depths. Shy children smile in the same way.

I was aware of her quick keen mind, I realised she was vastly superior to me in education, and was struck by the amiable condescension with

which she regarded her fellow-creatures. She was infinitely more interesting than any other girl or woman I had ever met. The casual way in which she told a story impressed me and led me to believe that in addition to knowing all that my revolutionary-minded friends knew, she was in possession of other knowledge, higher and more precious, that caused her to watch everything from a distance, as a bystander, wearing the smile a grownup wears when watching the amusing, if risky, play of children.

The basement quarters in which she lived consisted of two rooms: a small kitchen which served as an entrance-hall as well, and a big room with three windows facing the street and two looking out on a dirty refuse-strewn yard. Doubtless they could have made convenient quarters for a cobbler, but not for an elegant lady who had lived in Paris, the sacred city of the Great Revolution, of Molière, Beaumarchais, Hugo, and others of their kind. There were many other incongruities between the picture and the frame, all of which irritated me and evoked, among other sentiments, a feeling of compassion for this woman. Yet she herself seemed to be oblivious of things which I felt she should have found deeply offensive.

She was busy from morning to night. In the morning she worked as cook and chamber-maid, then she sat down at the big table under the windows and made pencil portraits from photographs of prosperous townsmen, or drew maps and coloured them, or helped her husband compile books on rural statistics. The dust of the street drifted down through the open window upon her head and the table, and the legs of passers-by threw thick shadows across her papers. She sang as she worked and when she grew tired of sitting would get up and waltz with a chair or play with her

child. Despite all the dirty work she did, she was always as neat and clean as a kitten.

Her husband was lazy and good-natured. He was given to reading French novels in bed, especially the novels of Dumas *père*. "They sweep the dust out of your braincells," he would say. He viewed life "from a purely scientific point of view", called dinner "the absorbing of nourishment", and, having dined, would say:

"In order to transfer food from the stomach to the body cells the organism must be in a state of absolute repose."

And so he would climb into bed without so much as shaking the crumbs out of his beard, read Dumas or de Montépin for a few minutes, and for the next two hours snore blissfully, causing his soft moustache to stir as if invisible insects were crawling in it. On waking up he would stare ponderously at the cracks in the ceiling for a while and at last come out with:

"Kuzma gave a wrong interpretation of Parnell's ideas last night."

And soon thereafter he would set out for Kuzma's with the purpose of putting him right, saying to his wife in parting:

"Finish calculating the data from the Maidan Volost for me, that's a dear. I'll be back soon."

At midnight or later he would come home in high spirits.

"Didn't I give it to Kuzma, just! He's got a good memory for facts, drat him, but so have I. By the way, he doesn't understand the first thing about Gladstone's eastern policy."

He was always talking about Binet, Richet, and mental hygiene, and when he was kept indoors by rain he would undertake the education of his wife's little girl, who had been born by chance

somewhere along the road between two love affairs.

"You must chew your food thoroughly, Lolya; that aids digestion by accelerating the transformation of food into a conglomerate of chemical elements easily absorbed."

After dinner, when he had reduced his organism to a state of "absolute repose", he would take the child to bed with him and say, by way of telling her a story:

"And so when the vain and blood-thirsty Napoleon usurped power...."

His lectures sent his wife into convulsions of laughter but he did not mind—he was asleep before he had time to take offence. After playing with his silky beard awhile, the little girl would curl up and fall asleep too. I became great friends with her. She enjoyed the stories I told her more than Boleslav's lectures on the blood-thirsty usurper and his unfortunate Josephine. My success made Boleslav amusingly jealous.

"I object, Peshkov! Before a child is brought into contact with life itself it must be taught the basic principles underlying it. Too bad you don't know English so that you could read *Mental Hygiene for Children*...."

He himself, I suspect, knew only one word of English: "Good-bye."

He was twice my age but as inquisitive as a young poodle. He liked to gossip and create the impression of knowing all the secrets of foreign as well as Russian revolutionary circles. Perhaps he really did know them, for he was always being visited by mysterious strangers who behaved as if they were great tragedians forced for the moment to play the part of simpletons. It was at his house I met the revolutionary Sabunayev who, being in hiding from the police, wore an ill-fitting red wig

and a gaudy suit that was comically tight for him.

One day when I arrived I caught sight of a perky little man with a small head who looked like a hairdresser. He was wearing checked trousers, a grey jacket, and squeaky shoes. Boleslav pushed me into the kitchen and whispered:

"He's just come from Paris with important information. He's got to see Korolenko; be so kind as to arrange it."

I tried to, but it turned out that Korolenko had had the man pointed out to him in the street and so he said to me in no uncertain terms:

"No, thank you, I will have nothing to do with that fop!"

Boleslav took this as an insult both to the Parisian and the "cause". He spent the next two days composing a letter to Korolenko, couching his protest now in terms of wrathful denunciation, now in a tone of gentle rebuke, and at last consigning all his epistolary efforts to the stove. Soon after this a series of arrests were made in Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and Vladimir, and it turned out that the man in the checked trousers was none other than the famous Landezen-Garting, the first police agent I had ever set eyes upon.

But taken all in all the husband of my beloved was a good sort, a little sentimental and with a comic streak supplied by the "scientific baggage" he was burdened with. He himself used to say:

"An intellectual's only excuse for living is to accumulate scientific knowledge which he can then distribute among the masses with no thought of personal gain."

My attachment deepened and caused me acute suffering. As I sat in the basement watching my beloved bending over her work-table I became possessed of a dark longing to pick her up in my arms and carry her away from that accursed room

stuffed with furniture—the big double bed, the heavy old-fashioned divan on which the child slept, the tables piled high with dusty books and papers. The legs of passers-by flashed past the windows absurdly, from time to time a homeless dog thrust its muzzle in; gusts of wind brought the stench of dust heated by the sun. Inside the room—stuffy air, the girlish figure at the table, her quiet singing, the scrape of her pen or pencil, the smile of her cornflower-blue eyes lifted for a moment to mine. . . . I loved her to distraction and pitied her to despair.

“Tell me some more about yourself,” she once said.

I began to tell her, but in a few moments she interrupted me:

“It’s not about yourself you’re talking.”

I realised only too well that what I was saying was not about myself, but about someone I have confused myself with.

I had yet to find my real self in the chaos of my impressions and adventures. So far I had been unable, even afraid, to do so. Who and what was I? The question baffled me. I was bitter against life; it had already driven me to a humiliating attempt at suicide. I did not understand people and found the lives they led to be stupid, low, and meaningless. A cultivated curiosity made me peer into all the dark corners of existence, into all the mysteries of life, and at time I felt myself capable of committing a crime out of sheer curiosity—capable of committing murder just to see how I would feel afterwards.

I feared that if I found my true self my beloved would behold a revolting creature caught in a fine mesh of preposterous thoughts and feelings; a ghoulish creature who would frighten and repel her. I felt I had to do something about myself.

I was certain that she would be able to help me and even to weave a magic spell which would liberate me from the dark impressions of the life around me. Then my soul would burst into a flame of surpassing strength and joy.

The casual tone in which she spoke of herself and the condescending attitude she showed to others led me to believe that she was in possession of some extraordinary knowledge, that she held in her hand the key to all of life's mysteries, and that was why she was always so gay and sure of herself. Perhaps I loved her most for what I least comprehended, but the fact was that I loved her with all the power and passion of youth. It was anguish for me to suppress a passion that consumed and exhausted me physically. A simpler, cruder acceptance of it would have eased my sufferings, but I believed that the relationship between a man and a woman was something greater than the mere physical union which I knew in its bestial form; in that form it inspired me almost with loathing, even though I was a strong and fairly sensual youth with an imagination that was easily fired.

How I should have become possessed of this romantic dream is more than I can say, but unwavering was my faith in something beyond all that I knew, something that contained within it the lofty and mysterious meaning of a man's relations with a woman, something great, joyful, even terrible, to be revealed in the first embrace; and I believed that he who experienced this great joy would be transformed for ever.

It seems to me that I did not get these fancies from the books I read; I cultivated them just to be perverse for, as I said in an early poem of mine, "I've come to this world to disagree."

Furthermore, I had a strange and haunting

memory: somewhere beyond the bounds of reality, some time in my earliest existence, I had experienced a great spiritual perturbation, a sweet trepidation, or rather—a foretaste of harmony, a joy more bright than the sun in its rising. Perhaps it was while I was still in my mother's womb that the nervous energy of some great joy she experienced was communicated to me in a fiery flash that gave my soul birth, ignited it to life; and perhaps that stunning moment of my mother's rapture launched me in life with a latent and quivering expectation of something extraordinary to be had of woman.

What a man does not know, he imagines. And the wisest of all the things he has learned to do is to love a woman and worship her beauty. All that is loveliest in the world has been born of his love of woman.

One day while bathing in the river I dived off the stern of a barge, struck my chest against the anchor-chain and caught my foot in it. There I hung, head-down in the water, until a carter pulled me out. They pumped the water out of me, scraping my skin badly. I was sick and spat blood and was made to go to bed and suck ice.

My beloved came to see me. She sat down beside my bed and asked how it had happened, smoothing my forehead with her dear hand and gazing at me with dark unquiet eyes.

I asked her if she couldn't see that I loved her.

"Yes," she said with a wary smile. "I see, and that is too bad, though I love you too."

At her words the earth leaped up and the trees in the garden reeled with joy. I was struck dumb with rapture and astonishment; I buried my head in her lap, and if I had not held on to her tightly I must surely have gone sailing through the window like a soap bubble.

"Don't move, it is bad for you," she said sternly, trying to put my head back on the pillow. "And if you don't calm yourself I will go home. What a mad fellow you are! I never knew anyone like you! As to us and our feelings—we'll talk about them when you get better."

She spoke with complete composure and the smile in her glowing eyes was inexpressibly tender. Soon she went away, leaving me radiant with hope and filled with the confidence that with her help I would soar into a realm of new thoughts and feelings.

A few days later we were sitting in a field at the edge of a gully outside of town. The wind rustled the bushes down below. A grey sky threatened rain. In drab, practical words she pointed out to me the difference in our ages, saying I had to begin studying and that it was too soon for me to burden myself with a wife and child. These dismal truths, spoken in the tone of a mother to her child, succeeded only in making me love and respect her the more. It was both sad and sweet to listen to her voice and her tender words. Never before had anyone spoken to me in such a way.

I glanced down into the yawning gully where the bushes, swept by the wind, were like a swift-moving green river, and in my heart of hearts I vowed to repay her for the affection she showed me by giving her my whole soul.

"We must think well before making any decision," I heard her say softly. She was slapping her knees with a hickory wand as she sat gazing in the direction of the town, which was buried in the green of its orchards.

"And naturally I must speak to Boleslav; he already suspects something and is fidgety. I don't like scenes."

It was all very sad and beautiful, but, as it turned out, there had to be a comic and vulgar touch.

My trousers were too wide for me at the waist and I had pinned them together with a brass pin some three inches long (such pins are not made any more, fortunately for impecunious lovers). The pin kept scratching me, and once when I made a careless movement it plunged into my side. I managed to extract it, but to my horror I felt the blood come spurting out of the wound, wetting my trousers. I had on no underwear and the cook's jacket came only to my waist. How was I to get up and walk away in wet trousers that clung to my legs?

Aware of the absurdity of the accident and angry that it should have taken such a burlesque form, I began to talk excitedly in the unnatural voice of an actor who has forgotten his lines.

She listened to me for a while, at first attentively, then with obvious perplexity.

"What high-sounding phrases!" she said. "It doesn't sound like you at all."

That was the last straw; I shut up like a clam.

"Time to go home, it's going to rain."

"I'm staying here."

"Why?"

What could I say?

"Are you angry with me?" she asked, peering tenderly into my eyes.

"Oh, no! With myself."

"You mustn't be angry with yourself either," she said, getting up.

I could not move. As I sat there in that warm puddle I fancied the blood was pouring out of my side with a noise she could not fail to detect, and that presently she would ask:

"What's that?"

"Go away," I mentally beseeched her.

She generously bestowed on me a few more tender words, then turned and walked away along the edge of the gully, swaying gently on her lovely legs. I watched her slim form diminish until she was out of sight; then I threw myself down on the ground, crushed by the certainty that this, my first love, would turn out unhappily.

And so it did. Her husband shed tears and mumbled a lot of sentimental drivel and she could not make up her mind to swim to my side across that treacly stream.

"He's so helpless and you're so strong!" she said to me with tears in her eyes. "He says if I leave him he'll wither like a flower without the sun...."

I guffawed at the recollection of the stumpy legs, womanish hips, and melon-shaped belly of the "flower". He had flies in his beard—they always found something to feed on there.

She smiled.

"It *was* a ridiculous thing to say," she admitted, "but it really is hard for him."

"And for me, too."

"Oh, but you're young and strong!"

For the first time in my life I felt that I was an enemy of the weak. Later on I was often to observe, in more serious circumstances, how tragically helpless the strong are when hemmed in by the weak, and how much precious energy of heart and mind is wasted on preserving the barren existence of those intended by Nature to perish.

Soon after that, half-ill and on the verge of insanity, I left the town and for nearly two years tramped the roads of Russia. I traversed the

valleys of the Volga and the Don; wandered through the Ukraine, the Crimea, and the Caucasus, absorbed countless impressions, had all sorts of adventures, and became coarser and more resentful than ever, yet deep in my heart I preserved the image of this woman, though I met others who were better and wiser than she.

And when one autumn day in Tiflis more than two years later I was told she had again come back from Paris and was delighted to hear that I was in the same town, I fainted for the first time in my life, strong, twenty-three-year-old youth that I was.

Perhaps I would never have found the courage to go and see her if she had not sent me an invitation through one of her friends.

I found her more lovely and charming than ever. She had the same girlish figure, the same delicate colouring, the same tender shine in her blue eyes. Her husband had remained in France; she had come alone with her daughter, a child as lively and graceful as a doe.

A thunderstorm was raging when I went to see her; the air was noisy with the downpour, rivers of rain streamed off Mount St. David, rushing through the streets with a force that tore up the cobblestones. The house was shaken by the roar of the wind, the angry splash of the water, and the bang and crash of destruction. The window-panes rattled, the room was continually lighted up by livid flashes, and everything seemed to be plunging down into a bottomless pit.

The frightened child buried her head in the bed-clothes; we stood at the window blinded by the lightning and speaking for some reason in a whisper.

"I've never before seen such a storm," came the words of my beloved.

Suddenly she asked, "Well, have you got over your feeling for me?"

"No."

She showed surprise and said in the same whisper:

"Goodness, how you've changed! You're an entirely different person!"

Slowly she sank into an armchair beside the window, started and frowned as a particularly vivid sheet of lightning flashed, and said:

"There's a lot of talk about you. What brought you here? Tell me about yourself."

God! How tiny and wonderful she was!

I talked until midnight, as if making confession to her. Nature in its grimmer aspects always excites me and makes me wildly jubilant. I must have spoken well, judging by the strained attention with which she listened and the fixed glance of her wide-open eyes. She only whispered from time to time:

"How really awful!"

On taking leave I noticed she said good-bye without the patronising smile of an elder to a younger that in former days had always vexed me. I walked down the wet streets watching the sharp sickle of the moon mow down the clouds, my head spinning with happiness. The next day I sent her the following poem by post (she recited it so often afterwards that it stuck in my memory):

*My lady!
A tender word, a gentle glance,
suffice to make an humble slave
of this magician,
fine-skilled in the art of transforming
trifles, nothing,
into little joys.*

*Accept unto yourself this slave!
 Perhaps he will transform little joys
 into a great happiness.
 Was not the great world created
 of tiny particles of matter?
 A none too jolly world I do confess,
 a world of rare and meagre joys;
 and yet it has its comic side:
 your humble slave, for instance,
 and a lovely side as well:
 who lovelier than you?
 But stay!
 Can the blunt nails of words
 fix the ethereal loveliness of you—
 fairest of earth's few flowers?*

This, of course, can hardly be called a poem, but it was written with jocular sincerity.

And so here I am, once more sitting opposite the most wonderful person in the world, one I cannot live without. She is wearing a blue gown which falls about her in soft folds without hiding the graceful outlines of her form. She speaks in words that are new to me as she sits playing with the tassels of her belt, and I watch the movement of her slender fingers tipped by pink nails and fancy I am like a violin being tuned by a skilful and loving musician. I long to die, I long to breathe this woman into my soul so that she will remain with me for ever. My body is taut and aching with strain and it seems as if my heart must burst.

I read my first story to her (it had just been published) but I don't remember what she thought of it. I seem to remember her saying in surprise:

“So you've turned to writing prose!” and then, as in a dream: “I've thought of you a lot during

these two years. Can it really be that you have undergone all these hardships for my sake?"

I murmured something about there being no hardships in a world in which she lived.

"How nice you are. . . ."

I longed desperately to embrace her, but I had such idiotically long arms and big hands that I dared not touch her for fear of hurting her. And so there I stood, swaying to the throbbing of my heart and murmuring:

"Come and live with me; I implore you to live with me!"

She laughed softly and with some embarrassment, and her dear eyes were blindingly bright. She withdrew into a corner of the room and said from there:

"This is what we'll do: you go back to Nizhny Novgorod and I'll stay here and think it over; then I'll write to you."

Bowing respectfully, like a hero out of one of the novels I had read, I walked away—on air.

That winter she and her daughter joined me in Nizhny Novgorod.

"Even the nights are short when a poor man marries," is the sad wisdom of a Russian folk saying. My own experience taught me the truth of it.

For two rubles a month we rented a whole house—the bath-house in a priest's back yard. I occupied the entry and my wife moved into the bath-house itself, which served us as drawing-room too. The building was hardly suited to family life—ice formed in the corners and along the seams. I worked mostly at night, wrapped up in all the clothes I owned with a carpet on top, and even so I caught a bad case of rheuma-

tism—most unexpected considering the hardiness I took such pride in at that time.

The bath-room itself was warmer, but whenever I made a fire in the stove the rooms reeked of soap, steamed birch leaves, and rotting wood. This made the little girl (a porcelain doll with beautiful eyes) grow nervous and get a headache.

In the spring spiders and wood-lice made their home in the bath-house. Mother and daughter nearly fainted at the sight of them and I had to swat them with a galosh. Our tiny windows were overgrown with wild elder-berry and raspberry bushes, which kept the rooms in a state of twilight, but the drunken and capricious priest would not allow me to uproot or even clip them.

We could, of course, have found more convenient quarters, but we owed the priest money and he was so fond of me he would not let me go.

"You'll get used to it," he would say. "And if not, pay me my money and go wherever you like—you can live with the English for all I care."

He hated the English.

"They're a lazy lot, never invented anything but solitaire and don't know how to fight," he asserted.

He was an enormous creature with a round red face and a big red beard, and he drank so much that he could no longer conduct services in the church. He suffered unspeakably for love of a little, sharp-nosed, black-haired seamstress who looked like a jack-daw.

He would slap the tears out of his beard with the palm of his hand as he told me about the tricks she played on him:

"I know she's a harpy but she reminds me of Phimiama the Martyr and that's why I love her."

I looked for that particular martyr in the *Lives of the Saints* but could not find her.

Indignant that I should be a non-believer, he

tried to stir my soul by exhorting me in the following way:

"Take a practical view of it, son: there's millions of believers and only a dozen or so non-believers. Why's that? Because a soul without the church is like a fish without water. See? Let's have a drink on it."

"I don't drink—bad for my rheumatism."

Spearing a piece of herring with his fork, he brandished it over his head and said threateningly:

"And that, too, is because you've got no faith."

I could not sleep nights for the shame of having my beloved live in that bath-house, of often having no money to buy meat for dinner or a toy for the child, of all my accursed poverty. I myself was not embarrassed by poverty, but it was humiliating and calamitous that this well-bred elegant young woman, and especially her little girl, should have to endure it.

At night as I sat at my table in the corner copying legal documents or writing stories I would grit my teeth and curse myself, my love, my fate, and people in general.

My beloved was magnanimous; she was like a mother who does not want her son to see how hard life is for her. Not once did a complaint escape her lips; the harder our conditions, the brighter her voice, the gayer her laughter. From morning to night she drew portraits of priests and their dead wives and made maps of the district. For these maps the local administration was once awarded a gold medal at an exhibition. When orders for portraits were no longer forthcoming she made fashionable Parisian hats for the women in our street out of bits of silk, straw, and wire. I was no judge of ladies' hats, but her fantastic creations must have been highly amus-

ing, for she choked with laughter whenever she tried them on in front of the looking-glass. And they had a strange effect on their wearers, who stuck out their bellies with a particularly proud air as they strutted down the street with her birds' nests perched on their heads.

I worked as a lawyer's clerk and wrote stories for the local newspaper, receiving two kopeks a line for my creative efforts. If we had no guests for tea in the evening my wife would amuse me by telling me stories of her school days. Alexander II, it seems, had paid frequent visits to the boarding-school in Belostok. He had treated the young ladies to sweets which in some miraculous way made some of them pregnant, and from time to time one or another of the prettiest of the girls accompanied him on hunting trips to the Belovezhskaya Reservation and then went straight to Petersburg to be married.

She told me lots of interesting things about Paris; I had already learned something about it through my reading, especially of the weighty volume written by Maxime Du Camp. She had learned to know Paris in the cafés of Montmartre and by living the wild life of the Latin Quarter. I found her stories more stimulating than wine and I wrote paens to women, convinced that all the beauty in the world was inspired by love of them.

Most of all I enjoyed hearing about her own love affairs—she told about them in a fascinating way and with a candour that sometimes caused me embarrassment. Laughingly, her words like light pencil strokes, she sketched for me a picture of the general to whom she had been engaged. Once during a royal hunting party he had shot an aurochs without giving the Tsar the opportunity to do so first, then had cried to the wounded beast: "Forgive me, Your Majesty!"

She told me about Russian political émigrés, and as she spoke I always fancied there was a smile of condescension on her lips. At times her sincerity led her to become naïvely cynical; she would run the pink tip of her tongue over her lips like a kitten and a peculiar light would shine in her eyes; sometimes she showed disgust. But mostly she was like a little girl absorbed in playing dolls.

One day she said to me:

“When a Russian is in love he becomes talkative and boring—sometimes even objectionably eloquent. The French are the only ones who know how to make love. For them love is almost a religion.”

After that I involuntarily became more restrained with her.

She said about French women:

“Their hearts are not always passionately tender, but in place of this they offer a carefully cultivated sensuality. Love for them is an art.”

Her tone was grave and instructive as she told me this. It was not the knowledge I was most in need of, but it was knowledge nonetheless, and I drank it in eagerly.

“The difference between Russian and French women is probably the same as the difference between fruit and fruit-flavoured sweetmeats,” she said one moonlit night.

She herself was a sweetmeat. I greatly astonished her during the first days of our life together by ardently expounding my romantic views on the relations between men and women.

“Are you serious? Do you really think that?” she had asked as she lay in my arms bathed in blue moonlight. Her pale flesh was transparent and gave off the heady fragrance of almonds.

Her slender fingers played absent-mindedly with my hair and there was an incredulous smile on her lips as she gazed at me with wide and unquiet eyes.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed, leaping down on to the floor and pacing backwards and forwards, from light into shadow, her fair skin gleaming like satin when the moonbeams fell on it, her bare feet noiselessly touching the floor boards. She came back to me and put her hands on my cheeks as she said in a maternal tone:

“Your first experience should have been with an innocent girl—yes it should! Not with me.”

When I picked her up in my arms she began to weep.

“You do realise how much I love you, don’t you?” she asked softly. “I have never been so happy with anybody as I am with you—that is the truth and you must believe me. I never loved anybody else so tenderly and with such a light heart. You can’t even imagine how good it is to be with you! And yet I say we have made a mistake—I am not the right woman for you—not for you. I have made a mistake.”

I did not understand her. Her words frightened me and I hastened to smother her mood in joyous endearments. But her odd words stuck in my memory. A few days later she again said, with ecstatic tears:

“Ah, if only you were my first love!”

I remember it being a stormy night; the elderberry branches beat against the window-panes, the wind howled in the chimney, the room was dark and cold and filled with the rustle of torn wallpaper.

Whenever we had a few extra rubles we would invite our friends to a fine supper: meat, vodka

and beer, pastries, and all sorts of good things. My Parisian had an excellent appetite and a weakness for Russian food: *sychug* (cow's maw stuffed with buckwheat and goose fat); pies with sweat-fish filling; mutton-and-potato soup.

She founded the "Order of Bursting Bellies" with a membership of a dozen or so friends who enjoyed hearty meals and good drink, had a fine knowledge of the culinary art, and could discourse on it eloquently and indefatigably. I was interested in art of another sort; I ate little and took little enjoyment in the process of feeding—it was not included in my aesthetic requirements.

"Empty sacks," was what I once called the Brothers of the Bursting Bellies.

"Anybody's empty if you give him a good shaking," she retorted. "Heine once said: 'We're all naked underneath our clothes'"

She knew a lot of cynical quotations, but it seemed to me she did not always apply them aptly.

She was fond of "giving a good shaking" to members of the male sex and was very skilful at it. Her wit and gaiety enabled her to make things lively wherever she was and she roused emotions that were not of the highest order. After talking to her for but a few moments a man's ears would turn red, then purple, his eyes would grow hazy, and he would gaze at her like a goat at a cabbage patch.

"A magnetic woman," observed the notary's assistant, a seedy nobleman with warts on his face and a belly the size of a church dome.

A fair-haired student from Yaroslavl wrote poetry to her—always in dactyls. I found the poetry loathsome but it made her laugh till the tears came.

"Why do you stir them up?" I once asked her.

"It's just as good sport as fishing," she said. "It's called flirting, and there's not a self-respecting woman in the world who doesn't enjoy it."

Sometimes she would peer slyly into my eyes and ask:

"Jealous?"

No, I was not jealous, but I was annoyed. I could not bear vulgarity. Jovial by nature, I realised that the ability to laugh was one of man's highest gifts. I despised circus clowns and stage comedians, sure that I could easily outdo them. Often I made our guests laugh till their sides ached.

"You'd make a marvellous comedian!" she once said. "You ought to go on the stage, really you ought."

She herself acted successfully in amateur performances and had had offers from professional producers.

"I love the stage, but I'm afraid of the backstage," she said.

She was truthful in thought, word, and desire.

"You philosophise too much," she would say to me. "Life in its essence is crude and simple. There's no sense in complicating it by searching for hidden meanings—the only thing one can do is try to make it less crude. No one can do more."

I felt there was too much gynaecology in her philosophy, and *A Course in Obstetrics* was her Bible. She herself told me what a shock she had got when, on leaving the girls' school, she had read her first scientific book.

"I had been so very innocent that it was like being hit over the head with a bat. I came plunging down out of the clouds into the mud, and I wept for the faith I had lost. But soon I felt that the ground under my feet was firm, if rough. The thing I wept for most was God—I had felt so

very close to Him, and all of a sudden He dissolved in thin air, like cigarette smoke, and with Him went my exalted dreams of love. How much we had thought, how beautifully we had talked about love at school!"

I was repelled by her nihilism—a mixture of a school-girl's naïveté and Parisian worldliness. Sometimes I would get up from my desk at night and go to look at her. She looked even smaller, more dainty, and beautiful in bed, and as I stood gazing down at her I would bitterly regret the vicissitudes of life that had warped her soul. My pity for her only strengthened my love.

Our literary tastes were quite different: I was an admirer of Balzac and Flaubert, she preferred Paul Féval, Octave Feuillet, and Paul de Kock. She was especially fond of the novel *Young Giraud, My Wife*, which she considered one of the wittiest she had ever read; I found it as boring as the criminal code. Despite this we got on well, did not become bored with each other or stop loving each other. But in the third year of our life together I became aware of something ominous stirring within me—and stirring with growing insistence. I was reading and studying intensively at the time and had begun to take my writing seriously. Our numerous guests interfered with my work. Most of them were uninteresting people, and their numbers had increased as an increase in our earnings made it possible for us to give dinners and suppers more frequently.

Life for her was a sort of panopticon, and since the men wore no sign reading "Please, do not touch," she would sometimes go too close to them and they would interpret this to their own advantage. Misunderstandings resulted which I was obliged to clear up. I was sometimes too impul-

sive, I was always inept; I remember a gentleman, whose ears I tweaked, complaining:

"Very well, I admit being at fault, but what right had he to tweak my ears? I'm not a schoolboy! I'm almost twice his age, and he goes tweaking my ears! A punch in the jaw would have been more dignified."

Apparently I was not versed in the art of dealing punishment appropriate to the offender's sense of dignity.

My wife did not take my stories very seriously, but at first I did not mind this. I myself did not believe that I would ever become a writer. True, I did experience moments of inspiration, but on the whole I looked upon my newspaper work as merely a means of gaining a livelihood. One morning I read *Old Izergil*, the fruits of my nights' labours, to her. She fell fast asleep. I was not offended at first. I stopped reading and gazed at her thoughtfully. The head I loved so dearly had dropped against the back of the rickety sofa, her lips were parted, and she was breathing as softly and evenly as an infant. The morning sun came peering through the elder-berry boughs at the window, scattering golden patches like transparent flowers over her breast and knees.

I got up and went out into the garden, now deeply hurt and filled with doubts as to my own literary powers.

Never in my life had I seen a woman who was not steeped either in dirt, lechery, poverty, and slavish labour, or in stuffy, vulgar, overfed self-complacency. Childhood had given to me only one lovely vision—that of Queen Margot, but a whole mountain range of other impressions separated me from her. I had supposed that women would rejoice in the story of Izergil's life, that it would rouse in them a longing for freedom and

beauty. And here was the woman I loved best—sleeping!

Why? Perhaps the instrument life had put into my hands was inadequate?

This woman occupied the place of a mother in my heart. I had hoped and believed that she would be able to stimulate my creative powers, and that under her influence the edge would be taken off the roughness life had developed in me.

That was thirty years ago, and the remembrance draws a smile to my lips today. But at that time her indisputable right to sleep when she felt sleepy caused me considerable pain.

I believed that sadness could be dispelled by talking about it in tones of levity. And I also suspected that someone who enjoyed human suffering was interfering in human affairs: an evil spirit that concocted family dramas and ruined people's lives. I looked upon this invisible demon as my personal enemy and did everything in my power to avoid his traps.

I remember that on reading (in Oldenburg's *Buddha, His Teachings and Followers*) the phrase "all existence is suffering," I deeply resented it. I had not seen much joy in life, but I felt that its suffering was fortuitous, not inevitable. And after a careful perusal of Bishop Chrisanth's *Religion of the Orient* I was even more deeply convinced that nothing could be more alien to my nature than a teaching that made sorrow, fear, and suffering the foundations of all life. After living through an intense period of religious ecstasy, I came to realise the humiliating futility of such emotion. Suffering became so repellent to me that I hated any sort of drama and learned to skilfully convert drama into comedy.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to go into all this

merely for the purpose of saying that a "family drama" was developing in our house, and that both of us were doing our best to prevent it. I have allowed myself this philosophical digression in order to retrace the tortuous path I traversed in the search for my true self.

My wife's innate cheerfulness made it impossible for her to play at drama—a game so many of your "psychologising" Russians of both sexes thoroughly enjoy in their homes.

And yet the dreary dactyls of the fair-haired student affected her like autumn rain. He covered sheet after sheet of note-paper with poems inscribed in a beautiful round hand, and thrust them between the leaves of books, inside of hats, and even in the sugar-bowl. Whenever I found such a neatly folded sheet I would hand it to my wife and say:

"Accept this latest attempt to melt your heart!"

At first Cupid's paper arrows made no impression on her; she would read the poems to me and together we would laugh over such lines as:

*Ever, for ever, I live but for you,
All other pleasures I gladly eschew.
Live but to bask in the warmth that you shed,
Watch every movement, each turn of your head,
Hover, a falcon, above your sweet bed....*

But one day after another such declaration on the part of the student she said pensively:

"I do feel sorry for him."

To which I replied that it was not for *him* I felt sorry. After that she stopped reading his poems to me.

The poet, a stocky young man four years older than me, was taciturn, persistent, and given to drink. On Sundays he would come to dinner at two o'clock in the afternoon and stay there, silent

and motionless, until two o'clock in the morning. He, like myself, was a lawyer's clerk. The extent of his absent-mindedness caused his good-natured employer great astonishment. He was, in addition, careless in the fulfilment of his duties and often remarked in a hoarse voice:

"It's all a lot of nonsense."

"What then is not nonsense?"

"Hm... how shall I put it?" he would reply ruminatively, raising his languid grey eyes to the ceiling. He never discovered how to put it.

He affected a boredom that irritated me more than anything else. Consumed a lot of drink but got drunk slowly he kept giving contemptuous little snorts when he was drunk. Apart from these negative traits I could see nothing remarkable in him, for there is a law by which a man is bound to see only the bad in one who pays court to his wife.

A rich relative in the Ukraine sent him fifty rubles a month—a lot of money in those days. On Sundays and holidays he always brought my wife chocolates and on her birthday presented her with a bronze alarm-clock representing a stump on which an owl was killing a grass-snake. This odious mechanism always woke me up an hour and seven minutes ahead of time.

My wife stopped flirting with the student and began treating him with the tenderness of a woman who feels responsible for having upset a man's emotional equilibrium. I asked her how she supposed this sad affair would end.

"I don't know," she said. "I have no definite feeling for him but I want to give him a shaking up. Something seems to slumber in him and I may be able to awaken it."

She was undoubtedly telling the truth. She was always wanting to wake up somebody, and suc-

ceeded admirably in doing so. But the thing she usually woke up was the beast in men. I told her the story of Circe, but this did no good, and little by little I found myself surrounded by bulls, bucks, and pigs.

My acquaintances told me hair-raising tales about her doings, but I repaid them for their trouble by being savagely rude.

"I'll give you a thrashing for such talk!" I would say.

Some of them retracted ignominiously, others took offence.

"You'll never accomplish anything by being rude," my wife said to me. "They'll only spread worse tales. Surely you aren't jealous, are you?"

No, I was too young and self-confident to be jealous. But there are certain thoughts, feelings, and problems that a man talks about to no one but the woman he loves. There are moments of sweet communion when he bares his very soul to her, as a believer to his god. And when I thought that in a moment of intimacy she might reveal these things—solely and utterly my own—to somebody else, I grew desperate; I foresaw something very like betrayal. Perhaps it is this apprehension that lies at the basis of all jealousy.

I realised that the life I was leading might take me off my chosen path. By this time I knew that I must give myself up wholly to literature. But it was impossible for me to work in such circumstances.

Life had taught me to accept people with their foibles and vices without losing respect for or interest in them. This happily prevented me from making domestic scenes. By then I could see that all people are more or less guilty before the unknown god of absolute truth, and that no one is as guilty before mankind as the self-righteous. The

self-righteous are monstrosities born of a union between vice and virtue brought about not through violence and rape, but through legitimate marriage, with ironical necessity playing the role of priest. Marriage is a mystery by which the union of two opposites almost always brings forth drab mediocrity. In those days I was as fond of paradoxes as a child of ices. The vividness of a paradox stimulated me like fine wine, and the paradoxicality of words served to smooth over the crude and hurtful paradoxes of facts.

"I think I had better go away," I said to my wife.

She considered a moment before answering.

"Yes," she said, "you are right. This is no life for you. I understand."

Both of us were sad and silent for a little, then we tenderly embraced and I left town. Soon after that she did too. She went on the stage.

And that is the end of the story of my first love—a happy story, though it had a sad ending.

Not long ago she died.

To her credit let it be said that she was a real woman. She knew how to take life as it came, yet every day for her was the eve of a holiday. She was always expecting that on the morrow the earth would bring forth new and ravishing flowers, that marvellous people would put in an appearance, and extraordinary events would take place.

She was mocking and contemptuous of life's hardships and waved them away like mosquitoes, always ready to be joyfully astonished by some good thing. This was not the ingenuous rapture of a schoolgirl; it was the wholesome joy of a person in love with the kaleidoscopic changes of life, the tragicomic entanglements of human re-

ations, the flow of daily events flashing by like dust motes in a ray of sunlight.

I cannot say that she loved people, but she loved to observe them. Often she hastened or retarded the development of a drama between husband and wife or between lovers by fanning the jealousy of one or heightening the infatuation of another. This dangerous game held fascination for her.

“‘Hunger and love govern the world’ and philosophy spoils it,” she used to say. “People live for love—it is all-important.”

Among our acquaintances was a bank clerk—a tall gaunt man with the slow and pompous stride of a crane. He was very fastidious about his clothes, and as he studied himself in the looking-glass he would flick his coat with bony fingers to remove dust which he alone could see. He was an enemy of all original ideas or expressive words; his heavy precise tongue would have none of them. He spoke slowly and impressively, invariably smoothing out his thin red moustache with cold fingers before he voiced any of the truisms he was so fond of.

“With the passing of time the science of chemistry will assume greater and greater importance in processing raw materials for use in industry. It has been justly said that women are capricious. There is no physiological difference between a wife and a mistress—only a legal one.”

Once I said to my wife with a serious mien:

“Do you still maintain that all notaries have wings?”

She replied in a grave and guilty tone:

“Oh, no, not that, but I *do* maintain that it is absurd to feed elephants soft-boiled eggs.”

After listening to us go on in this way for a minute or two our friend observed profoundly:

"I am under the impression that you are not speaking seriously."

Another time having just given his knee a painful bang against the leg of the table he said with conviction:

"Density is unquestionably an attribute of matter."

After seeing him to the door one evening my wife, half-reclining on my knee, said brightly and gaily:

"What a complete and absolute fool he is! A fool in everything—walk ... gestures ... every single thing! He fascinates me as a perfect type. Here, stroke my cheek."

She loved to have me run the tips of my fingers lightly over the faint traces of lines appearing under her sweet eyes. Nestling against me like a kitten, she purred:

"How marvellously interesting people are! Even a man whom others find a perfect bore can rouse my interest. I want to peer into him as into a box—perhaps I shall find something hidden away that nobody has ever discovered, something I shall be the first to see."

Her search for "discoveries" was not an affectation; she searched with the pleasure and inquisitiveness of a child entering a strange room for the first time. Sometimes she succeeded in kindling a spark of thought in listless eyes, but more often what she roused was a desire to possess her.

She admired her own body and would exclaim while standing naked in front of a looking-glass:

"How beautifully a woman is made! How harmonious the lines of her body are!"

And again:

"I feel stronger, healthier, and more clever when I'm well dressed."

That was true: a pretty frock added to her wit and gaiety and brought a triumphant sparkle to her eyes. She had the knack of making herself pretty frocks out of mere calico and of wearing them as if they were silk or velvet. Simple as they always were, they created the impression of elegance. Other women went into raptures over them—not always sincerely, but always vociferously. They envied her and I remember one of them saying peevishly:

“My gown cost three times as much as yours and isn’t one-tenth as pretty. It makes me green just to look at you.”

Naturally women disliked her and spread gossip about her. A woman doctor, who was as foolish as she was pretty, once said to me:

“That woman will suck all the blood out of you!”

I learned much from my first love, yet the irreconcilable differences that stood between us caused me much pain.

I took life too seriously, saw too much, thought too much, and lived in a constant state of unrest. A chorus of raucous voices were always hurling questions at me that she had no use for.

One day at the market I saw a policeman cudgel a handsome one-eyed old Jew, accusing him of having stolen radishes from a peddler. I saw the old man, his clothes covered with dust, go down the road slowly and with dignity, like a figure in a painting, his one dark eye fixed on the hot and cloudless sky, a thin red stream of blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth down on to his long white beard.

Thirty years have passed since that day, yet I can still see the trembling of his white eyebrows and the mute protest in the eye raised to heaven. It is hard to forget insults dealt to hu-

man beings—and may they never be forgotten!

I came home despondent, my soul torn by anger and despair. Such experiences made me hate the world and feel like an outsider subjected to the torture of being shown all that was low, filthy, stupid and horrifying, all that was an offence to the soul. It was at such moments that I became most acutely aware of the great gulf separating me from the woman I loved.

She was greatly astonished when I told her what was on my mind.

“Is *that* what has thrown you into such a state? What delicate nerves you have!” Then: “You said he was handsome? How could he have been handsome if he had only one eye?”

All suffering was repulsive to her; she could not bear to have people talk about misfortune, was never touched by lyric poetry, and rarely showed deep human sympathy. Her favourite poets were Heine, who laughed at his own sufferings, and Béranger.

Her attitude to life was something like that of a child to a magician: all of his tricks are interesting, but the best is always to come. He may not show it until tomorrow or even the day after, but show it he surely will.

I believe that in the moment of death she still hoped to see that last, most amazing and remarkable trick.

1923

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications

Please send your comments to 21, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, U S S.R.